

SciFpress

**MAKE
IT
SO
24**



a Star Trek fanzine

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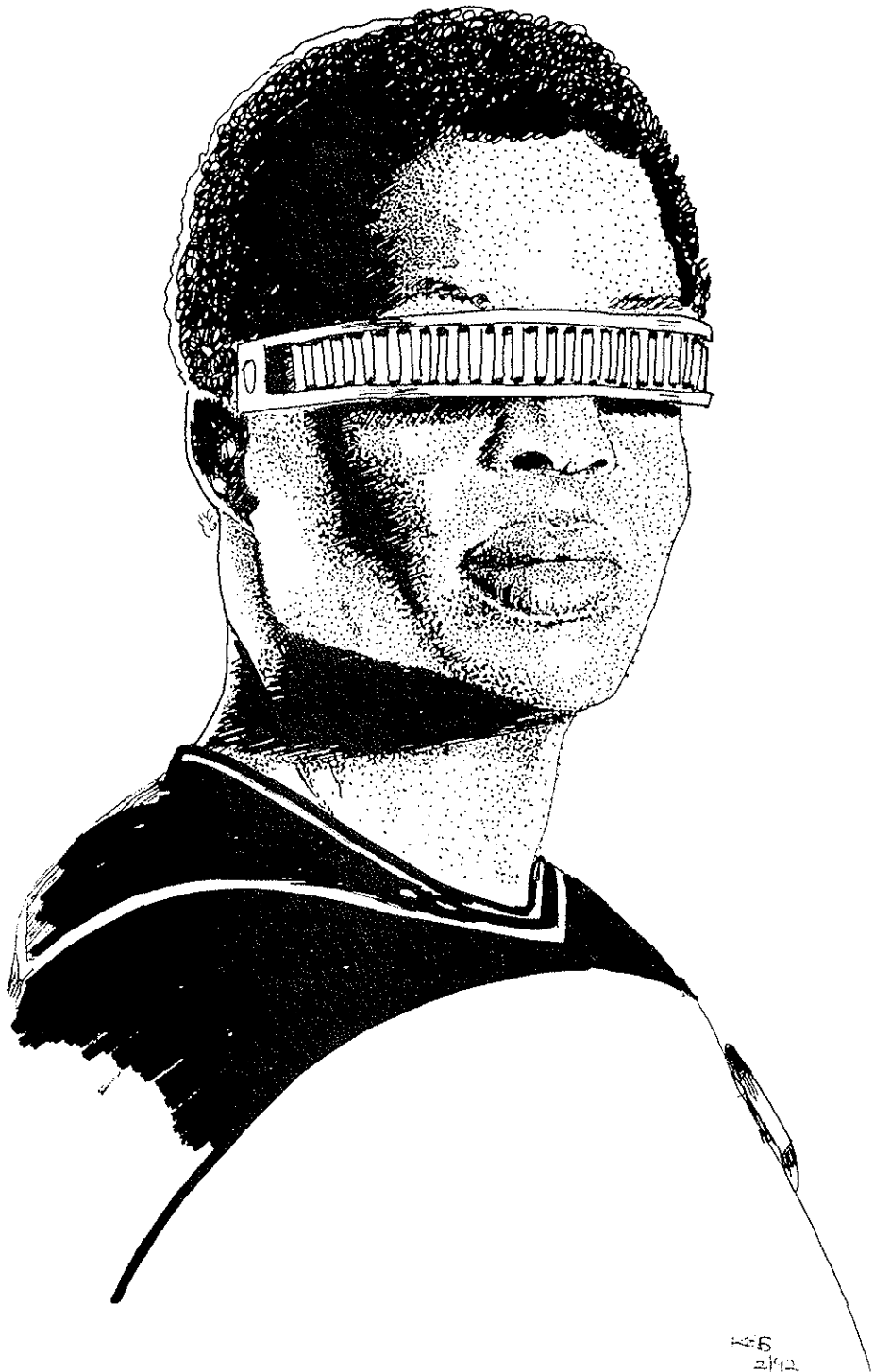
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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona



CUCKOOS IN THE NEST

by

Sandra Edge

"Lieutenant! Lt. Ersatz, it is you!"

The Lieutenant turned to see Commander Riker walking towards her, smiling. "Commander Riker! What are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for the Enterprise. I've been on shore leave and caught a lift from the 'Essex'. I was with her First Officer at the Academy. How about you? You weren't scheduled for leave, how come you're here?"

"As you know, we - that is, the Ensigns and I - have been trying to track down our 'errant' father and we've been trying to locate others like us. On Le Puy-5 we found, in their medical database, a family whose DNA had very similar characteristics to ours - in fact it was the grandmother of the family, who had fallen and had badly injured herself. So much so she required medical treatment, as she was 120 years of age. The local doctors took the opportunity to give her a thorough medical check, including a sample of her DNA.

"We have a search program that regularly checks the Federation's medical databases for any types of peculiarities. Clearly this lady and her family required investigation. I was due some leave, so here I am."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

Jenna looked at the Commander and smiled, but before she could answer -

"Tell you what, Lieutenant. why

don't I buy us dinner and you can tell me about your trip!"

"Commander... Dinner, well... I'm not sure it would be quite proper for us..."

"Lieutenant, I don't bite and it is my policy to get to know all my staff. As for not being proper, I'm only inviting you to dinner and we are not on the Enterprise now! Well, Lieutenant, dinner at about 8? Come on now, to eat or not to eat - "

They both burst out laughing and, still smiling, Jenna said, "All right Commander, since you're being so charming and we still have a couple of days yet until the Enterprise gets back. You're on the senior officer's deck. I'll come for you, it's on the way to the Restaurant suite. Say 7.45 if that's OK?"

"Perfect, Lieutenant, room L108 at 7.45."

Still smiling they entered the lifts and departed to their respective decks. Jenna looked at the clothes she'd brought with her and sighed. The only two outfits that would do weren't really up to a 'date' with Riker. She began to try them on.

She looked into the mirror. *God, a date with Riker. Now, you in the mirror, what exactly are you thinking about? Just don't get too carried away. You know he's bored, you're bored and there's nothing to do on this station. You KNOW that, so come on, put your hormones back into order - nothing, NOTHING is in this invitation.*

Come on, Jenna, you know deep down it's just the fact his reputation as the

Enterprise's lady-killer is making you want to 'tame' him, AND you know, no woman can compete with his true love, a captaincy and the Enterprise. Now get a hold of yourself - come on now, behave, put all those naughty ideas back in their boxes.

Good grief, is that my behind? I'm definitely going to have to get Dillon to help me with the work-outs, it really is in need of help. At least that makes the choice of outfit easier. Back to basics - the kingfisher blue dress. Thank goodness for those pleats, they do hide a multitude of sins - well, those extra helpings of Fiona's chocolate cake.

OK, mirror, how about the rest? Mmmm, not too bad. Well, good enough to maybe cause a stir.

As Jenna reached his door and pressed the button, she heard Riker call, "Please, come in. I'm just finishing some reports. There are some drinks on a tray, Lieutenant, help yourself."

"Thank you, Commander. Would you like a drink? Shall I bring one to you?"

"No, thanks, I won't be long, I'm nearly done. I'll be out in moment."

"Commander, there's someone at your door. Shall I answer it for you?"

Before Jenna could get to the door Commander Riker had started to come out of the other room. When he saw Jenna he stopped and smiled at her.

"Well, Lieutenant - er, Jenna, you look quite wonderful, that dress is terrific, it really brings out the colour of your eyes -"

His words echoed in the room. Jenna had reached the door and was

about to open it when the room became awash with a brilliant white-hot light. The noise was intense. The blast disintegrated the door and melted the sides of the walls; small ruptures in the secondary hull began to hiss as station 24-Delta's atmosphere ebbed into the dark velvet night of space. The blast blew both Jenna and Riker to the far walls like broken dolls.

Almost immediately the secondary hull's ruptures were re-sealed by the station's hull integrity fields. Emergency alarms sounded around the station and the medical teams were soon searching through the debris for the two officers.

At the same instant, the Ensigns on the Enterprise felt Jenna's pain and shock over the light-years that separated them. They all knew what they needed to do. They emerged from different turbolifts on the bridge. Lt. Worf looked up from his station as Ensign Henry walked down the ramp and was joined by the other two Ensigns. They positioned themselves in front of Captain Picard.

Captain Picard looked at the troubled faces of his Ensigns and then to Counselor Troi. She had stood up and was walking towards them; after only taking two steps she caught her breath and turned to look at the Captain. "My God - Will!"

Before she could say any more, Ensign Henry began to explain. "Captain, the Enterprise must change course; Jenna is badly hurt and Commander Riker is also injured. There has been an explosion on the station. They were together when it happened. We need to get to Jenna - if we don't, Captain, Jenna will die and we cannot let that happen!"

"Mister Worf, open a channel to the station."

"Aye, Captain - Wait, we have one incoming."

"On screen, Mister Worf."

"Not possible, Captain, we are too far away for visual. Only voice transmission."

"Proceed, Mister Worf."

"Channel open, Captain."

"Captain Picard, this is 24-Delta Station Chief William Sanders. We have had an explosion and two of your officers have been injured. Commander Riker's injuries are not critical and he is making good progress. My medical officer says he'll be fine in a couple of days. Your Lt. Ersatz, I'm afraid, is much more of a problem. She was much closer to the door and so caught more of the blast. Her injuries are quite severe. My medical officer says she has a less than a 50-50 chance of survival. Since you were due here in two days, would it be possible to get here sooner, as the explosion was not an accident - in fact, it was a bomb placed by the Commander's quarters. We require some assistance in finding the culprit or culprits."

"Thank you for your report. We are on our way to you, but it will be twenty hours before our arrival. Do you have any ideas on who could be responsible for such an act, Chief Sanders?"

"I'm sorry, Captain, but at this time, we have no clues. My medical officer still has Commander Riker under sedation and estimates it will be 10 hours before the Commander will be able to talk to us. We will of course keep you informed of all information as we get it."

"Thank you again, Chief Sanders. Picard out. Change course for Station 24-Delta, warp 8. Now, Ensigns, what

exactly do you know about all this?"

Ensign Henry looked at the others and then looked back at the Captain. "Captain, we are in contact with Jenna, we are not sure how. Before the explosion we were all aware of each other, but not as intensely as this. We will need to be in Jenna's quarters, so that we can focus on her and her injuries. We have to do this, Captain; if we cannot save her, then we will all die!"

A troubled Captain asked, "Ensign Henry, what do you mean you will all die?"

"Captain, we are linked, not only by our DNA structures but mentally. Over the last few months our awareness of each other has increased exponentially 1000 fold. We don't fully understand how or why, but we do know that if Jenna dies then we will too. At this distance from the station, the best we can hope for is to stabilise her condition and then as we get closer to the station, we can begin to try and regenerate the injured parts of her body."

"We have to go now to her quarters and focus on her. Once we are focused we will not be able to speak or communicate with anyone. The closer we get to Jenna, you may notice some minor systems interference; that will be us communicating. Please, you must not try to divert our attention or focus. We will be aware of our arrival at the station and we will remain in Jenna's quarters until we are successful - or not."

"Make it so, Ensigns, and good luck."

As the Ensigns reached the turbolift they all turned to look back at the bridge crew. Counselor Troi looked pale and drawn. Ensign Thursby smiled at her. "Counselor Troi, don't worry,

Commander Riker will be fine - it's not his time yet!"

As they entered Jenna's quarters, they each looked around for something to hold - favourite pieces of jewellery. Having found what they were looking for they began their ritual of the Musketeer's chant. As their voices echoed around the room they sat on the comfortable chairs, that they had positioned into a triangular shape, with their legs crossed under them.

They began to stare at the jewellery cupped in their hands and the air in the room began to crackle. Each looked deeply at their hands; their eyes closed. Still they could 'see' the jewellery and Jenna's face emerged, eyes wide, laughing. They looked deeper into Jenna's eyes and beyond, through the velvet of space and on to the station.

Several hours later on the bridge, the Captain sat in his chair watching the stars. He never had lost the wonder in looking at the stars; he remembered being a very small boy sitting under one of the apple trees, looking up and imagining space and adventures. That pleasant thought soon gave way to wondering about the Ensigns. They were able to be in contact with the Lieutenant and might be able to regenerate her. What else were they capable of? *Cuckoos in the nest*, kept repeating in his brain - and the nest was the Enterprise!

Counselor Troi felt the Captain's discomfort and understood his unease. "Captain, I do not feel that they are a threat. In fact, I felt that they were fighting to understand what is happening to them. They do believe that if Jenna dies, they will too. Their abilities are

formidable. They are not true telepaths in that they only seem to 'read' each other - however when they stood in front of me... I can only usually get others' feelings, but on the bridge I could see what they saw; only for an instant, then it was gone."

"Captain, incoming message from Station 24-Delta. Station Chief William Sanders for you."

All the bridge crew's attention focused on the Captain as he instructed Lt. Worf to put the message on screen.

"Captain Picard, I have news about your Lt. Ersatz. Her condition has stabilised, but she is in some sort of stasis. Our medical team is somehow being prevented from gaining access to her and they are extremely concerned. We are at a loss to explain how it occurred, and we have not been able to remove the field."

"Chief Sanders, please do not try to remove the field. I believe it is a part of an attempt to save the Lieutenant's life, by her sisters here on board the Enterprise. They are extremely gifted and if anyone can help the Lieutenant they will be able to do it."

"Captain, I don't understand. You are light years away and you are saying you have beings that can communicate over that distance!"

"Chief Sanders, this phenomenon only came to light a few hours ago. They are, as I said, very gifted individuals. How is the investigation going, have you made any progress in finding those involved?"

"Not as yet, Captain, however Commander Riker is here and is now recovered enough for us to be able to talk to him."

Counselor Troi paled and even Lt.

Worf's usual passive expression changed to concern when they saw the image of Commander Riker.

Captain Picard turned to Counselor Troi, gently brushed his hand over hers and, smiling, stood up and walked toward the image of Commander Riker.

"Well, Number One, are you recovering? You look a little worse for wear! Can you tell us anything that may help?"

"Captain, I am feeling fine now. Lt. Ersatz, she's... she took the full force of the explosion. It should have been me, not her! We were going to dinner - she called for me as she said the Restaurant suite was on the way. I had been doing some reports, when she came. She was going to answer the door, I was coming out of the other room, she was almost by the door, when it happened. I remember a white hot light, burning and being flung to the wall and nothing after that until this."

"Will, the station Chief believes that you were the target, as it was an explosive device. Can you think of anyone who would want you dead? Mr Data has been running both your files with the current residents and transients on the station.

"As yet only three life forms have any connection with you or the Lieutenant. For you there is a Griffin Eysak. He was at the academy at the same time as you. He left, however, before the second semester. Another is a Maya Roche. She is the widow of Lt. Commander Roche. Finally, a Durka Sechs, a resident of Le Puy-5; the only connection is that Lt. Ersatz visited that planet only a few days ago."

"My god! Captain, Griffin Eysak: the incident at the Academy is on file and at

the time he did threaten to kill me if he ever had the chance, but that was so long ago! I heard he had become a very accomplished industrialist in the Delta quadrant and has a seat on the High Council for the quadrant. No, I cannot believe that he would do this - it was not his style, as I remember him; forthright action would be his way, not sneaking around and placing bombs.

"Maya Roche... She said at her husband's trial and again at his subsequent assassination at the penal colony, that she would see me in hell for the suffering that she and her child had gone through. The last I heard, she was marrying the Ambassador of Neu-Australis in the Omega-section. Bombing is so impersonal, so random... No, I really don't believe that she would do this. I could imagine her using a disrupter on me, but not a bomb!

"Who is this Durka Sechs? Lt. Ersatz told me she went to see a family whose grandmother had DNA with similar characteristics to hers and the Ensigns."

"Will, you need to check Griffin Eysak and Maya Roche and find out whether they have forgiven and forgotten you. We have no other information regarding Durka Sechs, other than he's the great-grandson of the woman Lt. Ersatz went to see. Work with Chief Sanders. We will be arriving shortly. Picard out."

As the Enterprise was getting closer the Ensigns' power and concentration increased; their breathing was synchronous, the air crackled with 'charge' and as Commander Data and Counselor Troi entered Lt. Ersatz's quarters, Counselor Troi gripped Commander Data's arm. He immediately

supported her as she started to sink to the floor, her face twisted, and the look of intense pain made the Commander pick the Counselor up and take her outside the room. Once outside the Counselor quickly recovered. Commander Data had summoned Dr Crusher and she was hovered over the Counselor.

Supported by the Doctor and Commander Data, Counselor Troi stood up. "Thank you Data. Beverly, I'll be fine now, I'm all right. It was so overpowering - they are mentally on the station, I could see it. They are positioned over Jenna and they are viewing each injury. As they looked at it, I saw that too, they instructed Jenna's body to repair the damage. It was incredible, wonderful, amazing.

"I know why they believe that they will die if Jenna does; it's because they are using all of their energies in repairing Jenna's injuries. They are not replacing that energy and it could deplete beyond their own capacity to replace it and so kill them all."

Commander Data went back into the Lieutenant's quarters to take tricorder readings of the Ensigns. He saw the energy levels were off the scales; he also discovered that they were broadcasting on low level subspace bands. Their personal energy levels were becoming low - by his calculations, they would be beyond help in under two hours and they were still two hours away from the station. When the situation was reported to Captain Picard, he designated Data and Dr Crusher to find a way to feed the Ensigns. As Data and Dr Crusher understood the problem, clearly they needed to isolate the energy requirements and find a way to re-introduce energy to the Ensigns. Drugs and compound energy foods were ruled out as it needed energy to digest them and that would interrupt their concentration.

"Data, how are we going to give them an infusion of energy? It can't be food, can't be drugs... How else??"

"Doctor, my power pack is designed to recharge itself with no specified lifetime limit. We need to subject the Ensigns to a continuous stream of energy that they could take up and utilize."

"That's it, Data! If we create an energy field and bathe them in it, a form of osmosis should occur. Hopefully it will be enough."

"I have calculated that energy osmosis is possible and may be enough. However it is not absolutely granted to be successful as the rate of energy uptake may not be constant with each Ensign."

"We should oscillate the frequencies to enable maximum penetration through the skin. The field can be operational within ten minutes and could allow a maximum of an hour's extra energy to the Ensigns."

Meanwhile, on Station 24-Delta, Commander Riker sat opposite Griffin Eysak. It had been many years since they last met. Griffin Eysak stared at the injured man for some moments as they each looked into the other's face. Slowly Griffin Eysak smiled and his whole body relaxed.

"William T. Riker. Riker. It's really you. My God, you're one of the Starfleet officers who were injured in that explosion! You believe I tried to kill you, that's it. You think I want you dead, because of the incident at the Academy?"

"Eysak, you said at the time that you would have revenge; no matter how long it took, you would track me down and make me suffer as you believed I had

made you suffer."

Griffin Eysak looked back at Riker, sighed, and said, "All those years ago, I hated you and what you did to me, but as the years passed and I became wealthy and powerful, I decided that but for you I would have settled for being an officer on some space-bucket or other. Instead, having been thrown out of Starfleet, the urge to show them that they were wrong grew and so I became successful."

"No, Riker. There was a time, but no more. You could say I am what I am because of you. I can say it now - thank you, William T. Riker. We will never be friends, but I do salute you on occasion."

After the interview, Chief Sanders and Commander Riker reviewed all that Griffin Eysak had said and their feelings about the man. The interrogation computer had reported that Griffin Eysak had not exhibited any changes in his body chemistry that would indicate he was telling anything other than the truth.

"How do you feel, Commander, are you up to interviewing Maya Roche now?"

"I'm OK, Chief. The sooner we solve this the better, although I admit I'm nervous about seeing Maya. She and her child did have a rough time after Lt. Commander Roche's trial, and I heard later that her daughter had died in a skirmish on the Cardassian border."

Moments later, Maya Roche was brought into the interview room. As she was seated, she noticed a Human male come out from the darkened recess of the room. She stared at the man; realisation and recognition came very suddenly. Her face contorted and rage filled the room. She lunged towards the man, so quickly

the guards were wrong footed and she had time to dig in her nails and tear into the man's already injured face. She kicked and screamed for what seemed like hours; she was like a ferocious tiger. A small woman, deceptively strong, it took four guards to prise her away from Commander Riker.

The station's medical officer administered a muscle relaxant to the enraged woman and then tended to the wounds she had inflicted on the Commander.

"Commander, you really shouldn't do this, you are not fully recovered from the blast and now this! You must rest."

"Doctor, I will be fine. We need to know what happened and, more importantly, who did it. After this interview I will rest - the Enterprise is only an hour away now, so I will be fine. Thank you, Doctor."

"All right, Commander, but I warn you, any more than twenty minutes and I will be back and then I *will* sedate you!"

The Station Chief showed the Doctor to the door and promised that he would make the Commander rest as soon as the interview was over. Commander Riker sat directly opposite the woman, looking at her, her face was now passive and her body still. The relaxant had restricted her movements to almost slow motion, but the calming effect would be temporary.

While her body and face were now passive, her eyes were alive and the hatred oozed out of her. Station Chief Sanders crossed the room to face the woman and began speaking to her.

"My name is William Sanders and I am the Station Chief. We brought you here because you know Commander

Riker and he was injured in the explosion of some hours ago. Your hatred of Commander Riker is documented and your behaviour confirms that you still blame him for your husband's trial and death. What I want to know is, are you responsible for the explosion that injured him and Lt. Ersatz?"

At first she just stared at the Chief and then at the Commander. Eventually she moved in her chair in very slow, exaggerated movements, leaning forwards towards the Chief, and at the very last moment changed direction towards Commander Riker. Summoning all her strength she spat at the Commander and then fell backwards into her chair. Commander Riker looked at the woman, shaking his head as he wiped his face.

"Maya, you are sad. After all this time, your hatred has consumed you. There was a time when you were beautiful and happy; now, you blame me for all your ills. You were there, you know what your husband had become. Had it not been for the child within you, you could have been imprisoned. I tried - my God, I *tried* to help you, but you wouldn't let anyone. I pity you!"

Her eyes flamed at his words. She struggled to sit up and said, "Riker, you are a bastard. You still try to shift all the responsibility to me. *We*, you and I, *we*, were responsible for my husband's actions. If we had not been lovers... You left, you didn't even say good-bye, you just left, leaving me like so much excess baggage! He began to behave as though you and I had never been. I told him I wanted to leave and let him have some peace; he raged and cried, in the end I couldn't leave.

"He was once so proud of his work, every detail would be checked and double checked... After *you*, his concentration

deteriorated to the point where even simple changes in the computers' programmes were very taxing. He didn't mean to cause the accident when he changed the central computer systems.

"Akira, our daughter - yes, Riker, ours, 'the child within me' as you put it, was *our* child and she died on that planet when the Cardassians raided the outpost. She had been feverish and I had gone out to get some medication. When I returned the house was ablaze and later I could only find her favourite toy charred almost beyond recognition. That's all I have left of her. She was very beautiful, a gentle, happy child, she reminded me of another time and place...

"Now you want to know whether I planted a bomb to kill you. Riker, I do want you dead, but I want to do it and *see* you die, it's *you* I want dead - not strangers. Bombs kill the innocent, and they are not responsible, *you* are!"

As her words echoed around the room, Commander Riker seemed to wilt on his chair and become smaller. Her words stung him and shocked him. A child - his child. His mind brought up images of the past, a time on a planet, a warm sunny day with dazzling blue skies. Two people laughing and happy as they sipped the cold wine, a picnic, her wonderful green eyes, intoxicating smile. He remembered the feelings. He loved her. They had met almost six months previously at his induction to the outpost. She had been the induction lecturer. There had been an instant chemistry between them; he had asked her out and the affair went on from there.

Her husband had been seconded to another outpost in the system and had been away for almost twelve months. She had told Riker about her husband, saying they were going to divorce on his return. On the return of the husband, she

kept putting off and Riker had become increasingly alarmed; not only was he subordinate to her husband, he liked him. The affair had continued for some weeks after her husband's return, but eventually Riker decided that she must resolve the problem and tell her husband about them.

On hearing about the affair, her husband sent for Riker and informed him that his secondment to the outpost had been terminated and he was being transferred to a Starship. Shortly after, the accident occurred and Lt. Commander Roche was blamed and sent for trial, and was subsequently murdered on the penal colony by a relative of one of the group burned to death in the accident.

When he last saw Maya and the child at her husband's trial... He strained to remember the child. An image slowly filtered into his mind. A very small, dark-haired, very blue-eyed beautiful little girl. As the image intensified, he remembered pictures of his mother as a child, and the two images began to merge and the reality became painfully clear.

It had only been moments since Maya Roche's verbal attack on Commander Riker, Chief Sanders had been watching both of them and seen Commander Riker's passive face change and his whole being sag as the truth of the woman's words were etched in his face. Chief Sanders thought, not for the first time, that he would never understand these Humans and their need to inflict such emotional pain on one another.

As the misery of the last few minutes reverberated around the room the door opened and the Doctor came in. As he saw Commander Riker, obviously shocked and very much weakened, he demanded that the Commander be taken back to sickbay and the interview re-

convened later. The Chief agreed and ordered two of the guards to help the Commander. Maya Roche was helped to the security cell. As she was taken out of the room, her echoing, haunting laughter rang out.

High in the planet's orbit the Enterprise had finally arrived and the Captain sat in his chair surveying the planet.

"Equatorial orbit, Mr Data. Mr Worf, contact Chief Sanders."

"Aye, Captain. Hailing frequencies open to Chief Sanders."

"On screen. Hello, Chief Sanders. How is Lt. Ersatz, and where is Commander Riker?"

"Lt. Ersatz? Her condition continues to improve. My medical team is amazed at her injuries' regeneration - they would very much like to meet her sisters if that is possible."

"As for Commander Riker, unfortunately, he is back in our sickbay and my medical officer has estimated it will be at least two hours before Commander Riker is sufficiently recovered from the last attack."

"Maya Roche attacked Commander Riker and in his weakened condition was able to inflict more damage to his recovering injuries before she was restrained."

"What progress on the explosion, Chief Sanders?"

"We have interviewed both Griffin Eysak and Maya Roche. Given the woman's behaviour, it would favour her as the most likely culprit, although she

denied it. Griffin Eysak's performance would have us believe that he has Commander Riker to thank for his current status. They both have supplied alibis for the time the bomb was being placed outside Commander Riker's doorway, but as yet we do not have verification of them.

"As Lt. Ersatz has not yet regained consciousness, we have not yet interviewed Durka Sechs; he is for the moment under surveillance and is in his quarters. We are at the moment at an impasse. Have you any other facts that may be of help in tracking down the guilty parties, Captain?"

"All relevant information has been downloaded to your security terminals. With your permission I would like to beam down a team of specialists to help in determining those responsible."

"Certainly, Captain Picard. I appreciate any help. You have the coordinates?"

"Yes, we do. My chief medical officer would like to beam down to see the Lieutenant, as her sisters are very close to their energy depletion limits."

"No problem, Captain. Sanders out."

"Picard to Crusher."

"Yes, Captain."

"How are the Ensigns doing?"

"Captain, I'm extremely worried about Ensign Thursby. She is the youngest and her stamina seems to be less than the others; she is much closer to her limits. If we can't disengage them from the Lieutenant very soon, I think Ensign Thursby will not be able to survive long enough to replace the

expended energy."

"Thank you, Doctor. You may beam down to the medical facility now. Keep me apprised of any developments. Picard out!"

As Dr Crusher's transported signal firmed up in the room where Lt. Ersatz lay, she was aware of a scuffle by the doorway. Two of the outpost's guards were trying to remove a young man from the Lieutenant. The man's face looked familiar, though try as she might she couldn't pin it down.

"What's going on? What do you want here?"

"Dr Crusher? I am Durka Sechs and I must help her. To do that I must be with her, or, better still, with the others. They will not be able to disengage from her without me. My grandmother sent me to help - she knew that Lt. Ersatz would be in danger here. I can help. You have to believe me, they will all die if you don't let me help them now, Doctor - Thursby's time is very near!"

"I do believe you - I don't know why I do, but... You're right, time is very short. What do you need?"

"Thank you, Doctor. Please take me to the Ensigns."

Lt. Worf was waiting for Durka Sechs and as he saw the young man's face he could have sworn he saw Dillon Henry standing there.

"Durka Sechs, you are to follow me. I am to take you to Lt. Ersatz's quarters."

As the Klingon led the young man to the Lieutenant's quarters, Lt. Worf became aware of multiple emotions

towards the young man. He felt anger and something else - something very different. It shocked him, as he'd only had this other feeling when in the company of Ensign Henry. They arrived at the Lieutenant's quarters before he could analyse why and how he, a Warrior, could feel this way about a young man.

The door opened and Durka Sechs could see the Ensigns seated in their triangle and an energy field bathing them, also a couple of members of the crew. One was hovering about them, taking measurements.

On his entering the room, one of the two members of the crew turned to look at the young man, his tricorder sensing and supplying some surprising information. The other crew member walked over to the young man and said, "I am Captain Picard and this is Lt. Commander Data. He has been monitoring the Ensigns. His measurements indicate that they are perilously close to their limits; can you help them and Lt. Ersatz?"

"Yes, Captain, I can. Commander Data, you must be the android. My grandmother told me about you and all of this... Wonderful, simply wonderful. Your instruments are correct, they are nearly at the point of total energy depletion. I will need to be in the centre of their triangle and my grandmother will focus on me and together we will be able to feed them and disengage from Jenna. I require the energy field to be off and all subspace communications and transporters to be terminated. My grandmother is old and her mind-link will not last long - and my abilities are limited."

"Picard to Commander La Forge."

"La Forge here sir."

"Mister La Forge, sever all subspace communications. Also all transporters are to be powered down, until further notice."

"Acknowledged. La Forge out."

Commander Data terminated the energy flow to the Ensigns and Durka Sechs walked into the centre of the triangle. He positioned himself so that he looked at Ensign Thursby. Data noticed the extreme dip in her energy levels when the beam had ceased. For almost a full minute the tricorder had showed a downward reading for all the Ensigns, then very gradually the levels evened out and started to build again. Ensign Thursby's reading was now equal to the others, and growing. Twelve minutes later, the Ensigns' bodies began to sway slightly and Commander Data's tricorder began to register REM activity, then brain activity consistent with semi-consciousness.

"Captain, I believe they are beginning to regain consciousness. At this rate, they should be fully conscious in three minutes."

"Thank you Data. Picard to Crusher."

"Crusher here, Captain."

"The Ensigns appear to be regaining consciousness; how is the Lieutenant?"

"Captain, her brain activities are still off the scale, but her injuries have regenerated - it's amazing. She seems to be awakening, I'll contact you as soon as she is. Crusher out."

As predicted, the Ensigns simultaneously opened their eyes three minutes later. They were centred on Durka Sechs. For a full minute they stared at him, not really focused, but all

aware of their surroundings. Ensign Thursby's energy levels had been increased to compensate for her initial lack and she was the first to begin to move and stretch. Commander Data noted that the other two Ensign's energy levels were bubbling up to the wake-up level and together they also began to move and stretch. Finally, Durka Sechs, sank to the floor and sat exhausted, looking at the Ensigns in turn, smiling. For the next few minutes, the medical team scanned the group and pronounced them fit. The Captain walked over to them and sat on one of the chairs.

"Ensigns, you seem to be well. Doctor Crusher is with Lt. Ersatz and will contact us when she regains consciousness. What do you need to recover?"

Ensign Henry looked at the others and Durka, turned, smiling, then noticing Lt. Worf she beamed towards him as she gazed at him. Her expression changed to puzzlement and then a large grin emerged. Still grinning, she looked towards the Captain.

"Captain, we are fine. The next few days of eating and sleeping will restore us to our normal states very quickly. Durka will need to sleep for a while and then he will return to Le-Puy 5. Jenna will need a few days in sickbay to recover fully, but she will be fine in a week."

"Crusher to Picard."

"Go ahead, Doctor."

"Lt. Ersatz has just regained consciousness. I'll have her transferred to sickbay; she'll need to be there for a couple of days, but she be as good as new in a week. Crusher out."

"Thank you Ensigns, you are dismissed and well done! Mr. Sechs, you

may remain on board the Enterprise until you are ready to leave for your home world.

"Mr Worf, please show our guest to the guest quarters. Commander Data, please transport to the station and co-ordinate the work on finding those responsible for the explosion."

The sound of, "Aye, Captain," resounded as they all left Lt. Ersatz's quarters.

Walking towards the turbo-lift Lt. Worf motioned that Ensign Henry should walk with him. His voice a soft growl, "Are you well, Ensign?"

"Yes, thank you, Lieutenant. Thank you for your concern."

"You are under my command, it is my duty to be concerned."

"Of course, Lieutenant. Thank you anyway, but I had the feeling that it was more than that!"

"I would find it difficult to replace you; you are..."

Ensign Henry turned to look at Lt. Worf. His discomfort was evident, but underneath she could feel the intensity of his being, "It's OK, Lieutenant. I know, who else would teach you the Henry manoeuvres? Where are we up to now? Ah, yes, 63. Give me a week and -"

They had reached the turbolift before Lt. Worf could answer her. He couldn't stop two small creases around his lips forming through anticipation of their being on the holodeck.

Both Commander Data and Counselor Troi beamed to the station. As

they entered sickbay, Commander Riker was being firmly pushed back down on to the bed.

"Commander, I'm giving you a direct order. You will not try and get out of this bed again, or I'll have you transported back to the Enterprise and put into stasis, do you understand? Will, you *must* rest and let someone else find out what happened!"

"All right, Doctor, I promise I won't try and get up again. I'll behave. Ah! Deanna, it's not as bad as it looks - I'm fine!"

"Will? My god, Will, you're not fine, you're not fine at all!"

"Deanna, please - I'm OK! Data, are you co-ordinating the investigation team?"

"Yes Commander. Have you anything further to add to the statement you gave to the Station Chief?"

"No, Data, nothing. As I said, I had been finishing some reports in the other room when Lt. Ersatz said she was going to answer the door. Station Chief Sanders told me that they couldn't get a specific DNA scan outside as the corridor's used by so many as a short cut to the Restaurant. He has also checked the alibis of Griffin Eysak and Maya Roche. They were both seen in the shopping levels, and several assistants have made statements that clearly show that neither one of them could have planted the bomb outside my quarters."

"Commander, we have identified the device; it was an easily obtainable explosive, but the detonator was unusual in that the timer was of Cardassian origin. Both of the suspects could have bought the explosives - however, the detonator is not easily obtainable. Griffin Eysak

certainly has enough power to acquire it but Maya Roche could have found it after the Cardassian attack."

Counselor Troi looked at Dr Crusher, who asked, "Data, if they were both seen on the shopping levels, how could they plant the device?"

Commander Riker started to sit up, caught the eye of the Doctor and decided to lean on one elbow while saying, "They didn't have to, they could have paid someone to do it!"

"A reasonable supposition, Commander; however, we do not have any proof."

"Data, you're right, we do need proof. It's time you and I paid a visit to this Maya Roche. Don't worry, Will, I'll be fine. It's time to end all this!"

Counselor Troi and Commander Data left sickbay heading for the security cells where Maya Roche was being held for attacking Commander Riker. Feelings of satisfaction and rage enveloped Counselor Troi as they entered the security section - and something else, something small, hardly there but still a part of the ambience of the cell containing Maya Roche. Counselor Troi looked at this petite woman; she was almost fragile, delicate, a china doll as she lay unmoving on the cell bed. As the cell's occupant became aware of her visitors she turned her head towards the Counselor, gave a half smile and slowly got up and sat with her legs hanging over the edge of the bed, gently swaying forward and back.

As Counselor Troi and Commander Data reached the security force-field barrier, the woman sprang towards the Counselor, her screams terrifying and her rage colossal. Counselor Troi stepped back and even Commander Data moved back a little. They both knew that the

woman couldn't break out, but the intensity of the attack was unnerving for all who witnessed it. Still smiling, the woman got up from the floor and walked to the barrier, almost touching it. As she spoke her breath caused the force-field to ripple and crackle.

"What do you want?"

"Why did you try and attack us?" asked a truly puzzled Commander Data.

"You are like *him*, you're in Starfleet and you are his friends!"

"Did you bring the Cardassian detonator here from the outpost where your daughter was presumed to have died?"

"Presumed? *Presumed* died? What do you mean? No-one could have survived the blaze! She died alone in that house! I only found Lakia, her doll. What do you mean?"

"My research of the records shows that you left almost immediately after you found the wreckage of your house. Further analysis of the wreckage and debris showed no Human remains at all and in subsequent research into the records of Cardassian attacks, discovered that occasionally they did take prisoners, mainly children."

"Gods, no. No, she must be dead, I can't have wasted all this time! You're trying to trick me. That's it, that's it, you're trying to trick me!!!"

"These are facts. You can verify any or all of them. Your daughter was not killed in the house. Given the normal Cardassian skirmish methods there is a 89% probability that she was taken back to Cardassia as a slave for the Commander in charge of the attack!"

As Commander Data's words echoed in the room, the woman seemed to explode into violent action, throwing herself at the force-field, being thrown to the floor but still she kept trying to get through the field, over and over again, each time with more ferocity. The guards ran to the cell and released the force-field while another aimed a phaser at the demented woman. As she hurled herself at Commander Data the guard fired, using the stun setting which would have subdued most humanoids; however, she was totally unaffected. Her rage turned towards the guard who had fired on her. She sprang on him, knocking him to the ground in her effort to escape the security cells. Commander Data had moved to block her exit; as she positioned herself to batter him out of her way, she was hit by another phaser blast, this time set on maximum stun. Still trying to escape, she was hit twice more before she finally fell to the ground.

Gingerly the guards walked towards the woman, carefully prodding her to ensure she was unconscious. Dr. Crusher and a medical team came running into the room, finding two injured guards, one unconscious woman, Deanna holding a phaser and Data blocking the exit.

"Are you all right, Deanna?"

"I'm fine - now I need to see Will. Where will you be, Data?"

"I will be with Chief Sanders, speaking with Griffin Eysak in his quarters."

"I'll come with you, Deanna - and this woman needs to be in sickbay, please bring her along."

"Beverly, is it wise to bring her with us to sickbay? You didn't see her, she kept running into the force-field, getting

up and running at it again. The guards used a phaser on her and then I had to use three phaser shots to stop her - and it was set to maximum."

"Oh! Now that's interesting, she shouldn't have been able to withstand the force-field, let alone the phasers. I wonder how she did it?"

In sickbay Dr. Crusher examined Maya Roche and was intrigued and shocked by her findings. Dr Crusher put the still unconscious woman in stasis for everyone's safety. Counselor Troi was standing by Commander Riker, holding his hand, smiling and very quietly talking to him. Even from across sickbay, Dr Crusher made a silent prayer for them to get back together - *if ever a couple should be together*, she thought, *they should*. Commander Riker looked up at the Doctor as she stood opposite Counselor Troi.

"Interesting patient over there. She should have not been able to take all those hits, but she could because of the medication. She's dying of a particularly nasty virus that is usually contracted only by courtesans on the rim.

"It's not usually fatal, it only requires regular medicals and a course of a specific medication. I don't understand, she must have known - the symptoms are very specific, but maybe she didn't care and wanted to die!

"The medication she is on is based on the old anabolic steroids of the 20th century, it helps to build up muscle and strength, so delaying the wasting effect of the virus."

"I knew there was something else besides the rage, I could feel it," Deanna murmured. "Like when she heard Data say that her daughter might still be alive on Cardassia."

"What did you say, Deanna? She could be alive?"

"Yes, Will. Data found the records. She left before they had time to sift the wreckage and they couldn't find any DNA or any trace of a body. Data also found that at that time Cardassian Commanders sometimes took children as prisoners back to Cardassia as slaves."

Commander Riker slumped back, tears in his eyes. His breath left him to the sound of, "Nnnnoooo! Oh God, no!"

"Will? Will - what's wrong?"

In Griffin Eysak's quarters, Commander Data and Station Chief Sanders were continuing to interview Eysak. Throughout the interview Eysak appeared cool and charming, and gave the appearance of being totally innocent of any plot to kill Commander Riker. All the computer's chemical analysis of his performance registered normal. Both Chief Sanders and Commander Data, however, recognised that it was a performance, albeit a polished, perfect performance. Neither had any positive proof, only their certainty that this man was responsible and that they could not prove it.

"Tell us, Mr Eysak, how long have you known Maya Roche?"

Commander Data and Chief Sanders noticed the barest facial tic at the mention of her name; in the same instant, though, Eysak smoothly answered that they had met for the first time on this Station, some five days ago. The questioning continued throughout the night and into the next morning. Finally Eysak stood up and stretched, saying, "Gentlemen, I have answered enough

questions. Now, unless you are charging me with some crime, I am going to breakfast and then I shall be preparing to leave this Station as per my original logged flight plan. Gentlemen, it's been interesting. Good morning!" With that Griffin Eysak walked towards the door. A guard blocked his way until Chief Sanders nodded to the man to stand aside.

Chief Sanders thumped the table as the door closed behind Eysak. "Well, Commander Data, we have nothing to hold him on and his ship is scheduled to leave in four hours. I feel he's responsible - I can't explain it, but he is the one. Maybe he didn't plant the bomb, but he sure as hell paid for it to be done!"

"Chief, the facts we have do not fully support your theory, but I believe I would agree with you that Griffin Eysak has not been completely truthful and there is 98% probability that he was in some measure responsible for the explosion."

"La Forge to Data."

"Yes, Geordi."

"Can you come to the senior officers deck, now?"

"Acknowledged, Data out."

Commander Data and Chief Sanders stepped out of the lifts to see Commander La Forge sweeping the explosion site with a tricorder. On closer inspection, they saw it had been modified to pick up radiation signatures. An intrigued Commander Data asked for an explanation and Commander La Forge explained that he had wondered about the placing of the bomb and why someone had not seen it happen, particularly as this deck was used so much.

"That's when the idea of a site-to-site transport possibility occurred to me, and all transporters leave a radiation signature. It's just a matter of finding it. Since it happened almost two days ago now, the signature will be fading, so I modified this tricorder to pick up all occurrences of transporter signatures. As yet I've not found anything, but I've still to do this area here by the lift facing towards the Commander's doorway!"

"It would seem to be a valid course of action, given that so far no concrete evidence of an individual has emerged. Please continue with the sweep, Geordi."

Commander Data and Chief Sanders positioned themselves to the far right of the corridor as Commander La Forge swept the corridor with his tricorder. He started by the lift, working his way closer to the doorway; as he did, the tricorder began to display small molecules of radiation consistent with a Ferengi-designed transporter.

"Chief Sanders, according to the station specifications, this station doesn't have this type of transporter, does it?"

"That's correct, Commander La Forge, we don't - but Griffin Eysak's ship does! Chief Sanders to Security - detain Griffin Eysak. His ship is not to leave!"

Confronted with Commander La Forge's evidence, Griffin Eysak's cool, charming act dissolved and he broke down, giving Chief Sanders a full confession. In his confession he implicated Maya Roche. They had met almost a year previously and found that they had a mutual hatred for Commander Riker. The plan took six months to devise and set into action. As a council member he had access to many highly-placed people in the Federation. He found a way

to access Starfleet's transmissions and paid for information regarding Commander Riker and his usual leave plans. It had not been difficult to arrange for the transporter to be called away so that Commander Riker would have to arrange a lift from the Essex - and that Starship patrolled this sector, making Station 24-Delta the only place Commander Riker could be dropped off.

Having got the Commander here, it only remained to finish him off. To do that, both he and Maya had been shopping, trying on clothes etc. In one of the changing rooms, Eysak signalled his ship which was orbiting the station and a pre-programmed transport cycle began, depositing the bomb outside the door of Commander Riker's quarters. Eysak didn't know why the bomb had not been beamed directly into the Commander's quarters. In fact, it would have been but for the minor shift in the Station's alignment that had been implemented earlier that same morning.

As Eysak was being led away he looked at Commander Data. "Tell him it's not over - not now, not ever. I *will* get him some day. I'll find him and get him. Tell him."

"Will, are you sure? I can only keep her stable for a few hours once she's out of stasis - the virus has affected every major organ and nerve. The medication was wrong, it gave only a temporary remission. She has at most a day. She won't be in pain and I'll keep her in restraints, although her strength should have diminished now."

"I'm sure, Beverly. Please, I have to try; I have to know."

Doctor Crusher administered the hypo spray and slowly Maya Roche

became conscious, she could see the red-headed Doctor smiling at her, with her medi-scan in her hand; from her expression Maya knew she was losing the battle. On her other side there stood a small, dark-haired and black-eyed woman she knew she had seen before, but at first she couldn't think where. As the fog in her head lifted, she remembered where she'd seen the woman and what the other had said.

Sadness filled her being. If only she'd known! Why had they not told her? How could they? She had run and run... Not far enough to stem the pain of losing Akira, the things she'd done and become. She had wanted to die, needed to. Not now, there was a chance to find her beloved daughter and it was too late, death was all that was left. How sad and all because she fell in love with *him*. He never said good-bye and she wouldn't now be able to say good-bye to Akira. Tears formed and ran like torrents down her cheeks and a pitiful sob emerged from her throat.

Through the tears she made out a man's outline; she strained to focus and there he was - Riker. Why was she suffering like this? Her only sin was falling in love! As she looked into his face she saw pain - not from his injuries but something else... He looked like she felt. Maybe he could find Akira...

"Riker... Will, come closer. I want to speak to you alone!"

Counselor Troi and Dr. Crusher moved to the next bed, Troi very pale and tense.

"She is so... The hurt is so deep, and the pain of knowing her daughter may be still alive is overwhelming. She wanted to die. She needed to be with Akira, and she's changed the way she feels about Will - or maybe she's allowing her real

feelings for him to come back."

Some time later, Commander Riker called over to his friends, "Doctor, come quickly, she's not breathing!"

"I'm sorry, Will, she's gone. I can't help her now."

Several days later, Commander Riker walked into Lt. Ersatz's quarters to find the Ensigns sitting on the Lieutenant's bed laughing. As he entered the room they stood.

"Please, sit, I just came to see if the Lieutenant had recovered enough for an invitation to dinner tomorrow. The Doctor tells me she'll let you loose tomorrow and I do owe you a dinner."

The Ensigns and the Lieutenant beamed at each other and then Jenna turned to look at Commander Riker. "That would be very nice, Commander, I accept."

"Fine. I will come for you this time, Lieutenant, at 7-45."

"OK, I will see you then. Before you go, Commander, we would like your decision on a project we would like to undertake."

"Oh? I wasn't aware you have a joint project; what's it about?"

"As you know, we have some expertise in hacking computer systems and we think we have a way to tap into the Cardassian central data-base. We need your permission - not necessarily official, just one crewmate to another - to run low-level programs to track down the records of the Cardassian raid and any information relating to captives."

Lt. Ersatz's words fell into an abyss of silence. A shocked Commander Riker cupped his hand over his mouth and stroked his beard. He knew that if anyone could do it, they could; he had tried to get official sanctions to approach the Cardassians, but all he had received was official red-tape.

"Just how do you propose to do this without the Cardassians tracking it back to us and creating an incident, Lieutenant?"

"We propose to use their own systems, and if we begin at a low enough level the encroachment should be invisible. We have devised several back-up procedures which will cascade if any program is tampered with. Using their own communication systems, we can piggy-back on their carrier-wave signals and re-route through the sectors to a pre-arranged collating area, from which similar piggy-backs will be installed. We estimate that they have a -0.000000001% chance of back-tracking to the Enterprise; however, we would be aware of any traces and could terminate the programs before they could complete. At best they might have suspicions - but no facts!"

"Lieutenant, Starfleet have stonewalled me regarding this matter. Your solution is very tempting but I cannot put this ship into any kind of jeopardy. I will consult with the Captain - he must have the last word on this. Lieutenant - Jenna, Ensigns - please do not implement this. I will get back to you. But - thank you ladies, thank you."

At 7.00 am the next morning, Ensign Henry turned to look at the door appear in the holo-deck wall and Lt. Worf entered.

"Good morning, Lt. Worf, I believe

it's Henry 63 today!"

"Good morning to you, Ensign. Before we begin, I must speak with you about Durka Sechs."

"Oh. You look... concerned, Lieutenant."

"When he came on board, I... er... could have sworn it was you and later when we were walking along the corridors, I felt the way I do when *we* walk together. I had *feelings* that were..."

As Ensign Henry's laughter echoed around the suite, Lt. Worf's expression changed from confusion through anger to irritation.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I really am, but your description was... well... funny. I'm sorry. What you felt was me. Durka was being affected by us and we were being - well - imprinted on him, depending on where or how near he was to us, depending on whose imprint registered the most. You have no need to worry, your feelings, whatever they were, were for me, not Durka!"

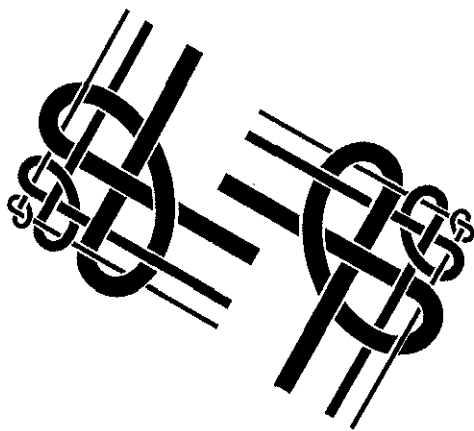
A placated Lt. Worf padded up to 'his' Ensign. As he looked her in the eyes he half smiled and growled, "You mentioned 63, Ensign."

Promptly at 7.45 that evening Commander Riker arrived at Lt. Ersatz's quarters. As she let him in, he noticed the dress - a kingfisher blue dress that brought out the colour of her eyes.

"Shall we go, Lieutenant? You look terrific. I think I've said that to you before. Hopefully we *will* get to eat this time."

Some weeks later, a terminal in Commander Riker's quarters began to receive information from the Cardassian central data-base...

To be continued.



AFTER

by

Ruth King

The Captain of the Enterprise stood in Ten Forward aware of very little apart from the passage of the stars and the drink clutched in his hand. If anyone had asked him he would have sworn he was preoccupied with ship's business, the choice of a new Chief Engineer, anything, rather than admit what was really bothering him.

He felt rather than saw the movement at his side.

"I saw him today, Guinan," he said quietly. "It's been so long that I had forgotten..."

"I know."

"He could have survived."

"Can you think of anything that you did wrong?" she asked.

"No."

"Well, then..."

"I guess I should be pleased that somewhere the Federation did not lose such a great man."

"That won't help."

"You're right. Guinan, you once told me that you let him go... How?"

"I lied, Captain. You don't lose someone who is as close as Picard was to me... to you, without keeping part of them. You just have to shut that away and carry on."

For some reason Captain Riker laughed. Guinan smiled at him. "If I'd told you that four

years ago, would you have beaten the Borg?"

"I guess we'll never know." But Riker had his suspicions. In at least one universe the Borg had won; his own counterpart's desperate pleas were convincing enough to show that the battle had had to be won at all costs. He remembered that day so clearly, every detail etched in his memory.

The Away Team on the Borg vessel had detected the power build-up that had signalled the death cry of the cube-shaped vessel and he'd ordered them to beam back.

"Mr Crusher, as soon as the Away Team is on board, get us out of here!" he commanded.

"Aye, sir." The Ensign sounded relieved.

Locutus began to convulse as the Borg attempted to disconnect their link with him. Beverly Crusher anxiously scanned his life signs. "Will, you've got to stop this!" she almost screamed. "They're killing him!"

Riker looked on hopelessly. There was nothing he could do. The being who was once Jean-Luc Picard collapsed; Beverly let out a cry as the body disintegrated to nothing. Riker found himself looking at the spot on the floor where his Captain had once stood. He forced himself to say, "I'd better let the crew know."

He took the turbolift to the bridge

without really being aware of what he was doing. His whole body felt numb. Was that Jean-Luc Picard he had just destroyed, or Locutus of Borg?

The atmosphere on the bridge was ecstatic; after all, they had every right to be pleased with themselves. There would be several Starfleet commendations in order. As the turbolift doors slid open the bridge crew turned to their Captain expectantly. Pulling down his uniform shirt, Riker sat in the centre seat.

"Mr Worf, hail all stations," he ordered.

"Aye, sir."

Riker got to his feet. He suddenly felt very old.

"Attention all hands. I regret to inform you that, ten minutes ago, Captain Jean-Luc Picard died as a result of his contact with the Borg. A memorial service will be held as soon as it can be arranged. Thank you."

He wanted to say more but, uncharacteristically, the words would not come. For the first time he looked at the astonished faces surrounding him. They had all assumed (as he had himself) that their Captain had been saved. Some of them were blank, others uncomprehending, accusing. He couldn't take it any longer; turning, he fled to the ready room.

It seemed like hours later when the door chime interrupted his thoughts. He almost ignored it.

"Come in."

Commander Shelby entered the room almost apologetically. "Sir, Starfleet Command has ordered us back to Earth Station McKinley. Shall I ask Crusher to

set a course?"

"Make it so," he replied without really thinking, wincing at his choice of words. "Commander."

"Yes, sir?"

"Would you have taken that risk today?"

"The truth?"

"Yes."

"I don't know, sir."

Captain Riker's mind skipped forward to the memorial service that Starfleet had insisted on holding.

It was a vastly extravagant affair, one that Picard would have avoided going to if he could possibly have done so. The Enterprise's complement stood some way apart from the plethora of Admirals, Ambassadors and other Starfleet dignitaries, Data looking deeply interested in the reactions of all around him, Worf muttering a Klingon ritual, Deanna with unashamed tears streaming down her face, Geordi inscrutable behind his visor. The one unexpected element was Wesley's reaction; he stood boldly at attention, supporting his distraught mother. Beverly probably wasn't aware that the only thing keeping her upright was her son's strong arm. Riker would have thought that Wesley was relatively unaffected if he hadn't caught him beating hell out of Worf's calisthenics program the next day.

The Captain himself had left only a written will. No tear-jerking holograms for the strictly unemotional Jean-Luc Picard. He had surprisingly few possessions; books to be distributed

around his family and friends, a bottle of Aldebaran whisky for his former First Officer, his prize tropical fish collection was entrusted to Commander Data and Wesley Crusher had received the volume of Shakespeare plays that had once sat in the ready room, not to mention the model of the Stargazer.

Life had slowly returned to normal, a fact that surprised Riker. Of course there had always been that nagging doubt - "What would have happened if Captain Picard had survived?" Most of the time Riker managed to push those thoughts to the back of his mind. There was no point in dwelling on what might have been. Going over his actions on that day he knew he would not have done anything different. As a result of the quantum fissure, however, he had evidence to the contrary.

"There had to be a way," Riker whispered to himself.

"When you've finished with your self-

recrimination," Guinan interrupted, "there's someone who could probably do with your help."

Riker followed her gaze to the slumped figure of Lt Crusher. The young tactical officer was with a crowd of his peers but his heart and soul were not with the party. The Captain crossed the room and tapped the young man on the shoulder.

"Could I have a word with you, Lieutenant?" Riker asked and gestured to a quieter corner of the bar.

"Sir?" Crusher asked when they were seated at the table.

Riker gestured to the waitress, who brought over a suspicious-looking bottle and a couple of glasses. Without saying another word he filled the glasses.

"Aldebaran whisky - probably the only real alcohol on board the ship." Riker raised his glass. "To Captain Jean-Luc Picard."

Silently, Crusher returned the toast.



THE TEN YEAR MISSION - AN INFORMAL BRIEFING

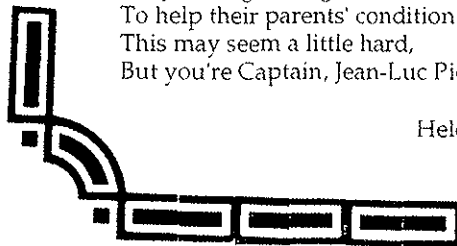
This mission is stated quite clear -
Study space, the final frontier.
Your ship is fast and sleek.
Observe both the strong and the meek.
At all times respect every life-form,
Never threaten, bluster or storm.
Remember the Prime Directive,
Don't interfere in how they might live.

The crew is made up of the cream
Drawn from various teams.
Your first task is to make them as one,
Then the rest of the work can be done.
They'll work well together for you,
You'll find them an incredible crew,
And when you're all set with the rest
You'll solve the most difficult test.

Your ship is simply supreme,
Of her class, she is the queen.
She'll take you out there and back,
At her duty you'll not find her slack.
Stating her worth, I'm not wrong;
She's built to be fast, sleek and strong.
She'll surpass and ship of her size,
She's the Starship Enterprise.

There's just one more little fact -
You'll have to use some more tact.
It's a duty you'll just have to learn,
With the children don't be too stern.
They must go along on this mission
To help their parents' condition.
This may seem a little hard,
But you're Captain, Jean-Luc Picard.

Helen Connor



ENTERPRISE SATURDAY NIGHT

(Chief O'Brien's song)

Saturday night and Ten Forward's packed,
The drinks are watered and the decks are stacked.
Wesley is smirking at some joke that he's cracked
The gamblers are cursing at the cards that they've backed.
Saturday night and Ten Forward's jammed
We've got our table and the rest be damned
Guinan's hovering close at hand
We're loaded earlier than we planned.

That damned Klingon's starting a fight
Why does he wait for Saturday night?

Riker and Troi are both busy indeed,
Making up for lost time in the rear.
La Forge is beginning to sweat,
While a stranger is sticking her tongue in his ear.
Data's explaining the next revolution,
Picard is granting the crew absolution.
Whoever is running her foot up my leg,
I love you.

Saturday night and the music roars,
Off in the corner the sound of snores,
Wesley's laughing at another weak joke
And Worf is ordering Scotch and Coke.
Saturday night and my friends are blind
They're rocking the table just to blow my mind.
I don't know why but I'm on my knees
Showing Picard how an ape climbs trees.

That damned Klingon's starting a fight,
Why does he wait for Saturday night?

Will and Deanna are busy indeed,
Making up for lost time in the rear.
Geordi's beginning to faint
While a stranger still has her tongue in his ear
Data's conducting the next revolution,
Picard's confirming the crew's absolution.
Whoever is running her foot up my leg,
I love you.

Riker and Troi are both being arrested
For making up time in the rear.
Geordi's out calling the lift
With a stranger who still has her tongue in his ear.
Data's abandoned the next revolution,
Picard has cancelled the crew's absolution.
Whoever is running her foot up my leg,
I love you.

(Based on "Saturday Night" written and sung by Tom Paxton)

Alan Boag



GOLDEN STAR, MORNING WISDOM

by

Taruka Quauhtezcatl

Hurtling through the wastes of space, imprisoned within a monoclinic dilithium crystal, Auey found herself with plenty of time to ponder her situation. She had set the rules; now, she supposed, she would have to live by them.

A short time earlier these same stars and planets had been her playground; with infinite powers she could wander at will through time and space but, tiring of the feeling of omnipotence that gave her, she had gone to her elders and requested that she be allowed to leave the Continuum.

There had been much debate - what chaos would she cause if she was let out? Others had lost asteroid belts, torn the time-lines and generally made nuisances of themselves.

"Look, you know me by now. I'll make a few promises," said Auey. "I won't use my powers unless I really have to, and I won't interfere with any other races... except to undo damage caused by anyone else in the Continuum."

"And we will add one. Wherever your crystal prison is shattered, you will make your home, taking the form of whatever is the dominant life form of the planet, and a name in the language of that life form."

"And my powers?"

"You'll still have most of them, except one. We're modifying your immortality. If your body is destroyed you may form another, but also you must do this at intervals, or return to the Continuum."

"If I leave the planet?"

"You must continue to live as whatever life form you choose, but must not show your power without good reason."

Those cautions in her head, she was refracted into the dilithium crystal and flung into the depths of space. Her colleagues knew that sooner or later she would turn up again. Auey was not malignant, she had a great respect for others - which was highly surprising, for Auey was one of the beings known as the Q.

From such a beginning grew a legend, at least on a tiny planet in a relatively uninteresting corner of the galaxy, that of the god who lived among her people, her name Qoriquoyllur Yachay Paqarina; Golden Star, Morning Wisdom.

Troi jumped up, startled. Suddenly the bridge was no longer there. She saw trees and bushes, and she was running, running...

"Counselor! What is it?" Picard's voice cut through the images, sounding distant.

"I... do not know, Captain." Troi shook her head and it seemed to clear a little. "I see forests, being chased through forests. A very powerful feeling of fear, terror almost."

"Where from? On this ship?"

"No, somewhere else. I do not

know where. The signal has travelled a very long way."

Picard stood in silence. "A creature that can transmit thoughts through space?"

"It would seem so, Captain." This was Data, frantically working the computer console. But he drew a blank. "There are no records of any such life-form in this part of the Galaxy."

"No, there wouldn't be," said Picard. "Counselor, what else can you tell us?"

"Very little, Captain. They seem humanoid but I'm not certain. There is a fear there and an urgent need to communicate. I'm going to try to answer the call."

"Can you do that? I thought your powers were limited in that respect."

"I can try."

"Make it so."

Carefully the half-Betazoid let her mind reach out to whoever or whatever was sending the telepathic message. The entity, wherever it was, felt the response and the intensity settled, as if knowing that Troi could not take the full power of the transmission. Strange words cut through the link - "Haku, haku, kaypachaman ripunki, haku." They were directed somewhere else, on a slightly different wavelength. Then equally suddenly the contact was broken. Troi had learned nothing.

With a crash the great doors of the Qorikancha fell downwards and inwards, sending up a shower of dust and making the oil lamps flicker in the slipstream. Four armed men stood there,

the light glittering on their steel cuirasses and helmets. Long-barrelled phaser rifles gave them an air of absolute authority.

Unmoved by all this, Jacku stood by the altar, her blue-white feathers ruffled by the air. She had elected to stay in the temple until the others were safely away. Then, she hoped, she would join them.

The leader of the soldiers shouted something which Jacku could not understand, but which she did not like the sound of.

"Huelisquin!" she replied, "Mana ch'achachiwankichis!" and fled through the door in the far wall behind the altar. She had been born in the Qorikancha and knew it well, but she also knew that there were very few places to hide.

The wall disintegrated behind her, and she stood alone and unarmed as one of the soldiers slowly and deliberately took aim. Jacku smiled at him, drew her feathers close to her body and vanished. The phaser bolt hit the wall where she had just been.

Jacku, and the others like her, were her people's only hope. The people of the forest, who were enslaved; or her own, who were hunted or worse, looked to the kallawayakuna to help them. There was no help on Tierra Venida - the huelisquin had seen to that when they first arrived. No, they must look elsewhere, to the sky, from where the huelisquin themselves had come.

The other four were waiting for her at their meeting-place by one of two waterfalls; Diamond Falls, a crystal-clear waterfall which Jacku's people called Ch'aya Phawchi in order to distinguish it from Ch'inkil Phawchi where the plants grew. Quickly they climbed into the vessel they hoped could make the journey, carved by the fire from

the rocks of the largest volcano, from granite and obsidian, sealed with powdered rock and just large enough to carry them.

Jacku took one last look around her at Tierra Venida and then closed the obsidian hood over her. All was dark and now they must wait to see if the message they brought could or would be heard. She felt their stone prison lift from the ground. That would be the combined efforts of Auey, Gloria and Chetia. Jacku reached out and touched feathers; she could not tell whose they were, but she channelled all the power she could find to the unknown form, and then slept. Around her she heard steady breathing, except for one of the others. They had agreed that each would keep watch for a certain length of time, though watch for what remained a mystery.

It had been a long and tiring day on the Enterprise. A considerable number of small things had gone wrong, the most disastrous of which from the bridge crew's point of view was the main turbolift computer's blowing a fuse, with the result that no matter where it was ordered to go you invariably ended up in Main Engineering. If you were already in Main Engineering, however, it took you to Ten Forward (from which few crew members wished to depart) or Holodeck 4, depending on its choice. Geordi and Data were deep in the innards of a panel, with pieces of mechanism strewn all over Cargo Bay 6; they had had to climb down the ladder in order to get there.

So did Riker when he went to see how they were progressing. "How's it going?"

"We seem to have pinpointed the trouble to a minor fuse in the voice decoder," said Data, "but as you can see it

is taking some time to trace it."

"Where's Geordi?"

"I'm here," came Geordi's voice from the depths of the turbolift mechanism, "and if I don't find the fuse I think the whole crew will soon be taking a lot more exercise."

Data began to speak, but Geordi's hand appeared holding a ridiculously small fuse. "Got it. Can hardly be seen, but it's amazing what trouble it can cause."

"Couldn't you have got automatic damage control to see to it?"

"No, sir. You see, this little beauty's in the circuits which control all commands to the turbolifts -"

"And that includes damage control, which means that if you..."

"All right, Data, I get the picture. How long before we have a functioning turbolift?"

"Oh, not so long..."

"Fifteen minutes, three and one half seconds."

Smiling at Data's efficiency, if lack of tact, Riker told them to carry on and left to take over the bridge from Picard. If things were going to get any worse the Captain would need all the rest he could get.

Well, nearly so. Several hours later a whistle sounded, followed by, "Bridge to Captain Picard."

Dragging himself from what had been a comfortable bed, Picard tapped his communicator pin. "What is it, Number One?"

"Sensors picking up an unidentified object at maximum range, travelling slowly."

"That all?"

"Yes, but I think you'd better come and see for yourself."

Grumbling about his interrupted sleep, Picard pulled his uniform on and headed down the corridor to the turbolift. He hoped Geordi had got it working again.

This time he managed to arrive at the bridge. As he looked round from the door he saw Riker, Worf, Wesley and Data trying to make sense of the object, strange as it was, and as he sat down he said, "How fast is that thing?"

Data turned. "It seems to be moving at a very low speed. The fact that it is approaching is entirely the result of our own velocity toward it."

"What else do sensors tell us?"

"It is totally unlike anything ever seen before. It is far too small for any known space craft and appears to be constructed of minerals; quartz, felspar, pitchblende, mica and obsidian."

"Volcanic rock? Then it's a meteorite?"

"That's what we thought, 'sir,'" said Riker, "but according to what Data told me earlier there are five life forms aboard."

"Are you sure, Number One?"

"Sensors confirm it," said Worf. "Definitely five."

"Propulsion system?"

"None that sensors can pick up."

"Weapons?"

"None." The Klingon sounded somewhat disappointed.

"Status of life forms?"

"In suspended animation, except one. Sensors indicate that the ship has been in space for some considerable time, about a hundred days, possibly more."

By now the object was clearly visible on the main viewer. It was extremely small and looked not unlike a smooth granite meteorite.

"That's it?" Picard looked again. "Counselor Troi, can you pick up anything?"

Troi let her mind reach out to the object, but she had barely begun when her mind felt as if it had been invaded by images, by a thousand thoughts, none of them her own; in an instant she saw trees, meteors falling, then armoured figures, a chase, and the final desperate flight from the Qorikancha. All were confused, as if fear had scrambled the thoughts. But they were so clear....

"Counselor!" Picard's voice. She opened her eyes to see the worried faces of Picard and Riker, who was slightly nearer and much the more concerned. She managed a smile. But what was she doing lying on the deck of the Bridge?

As she sat up Picard said, "You've been out cold for three hours, but we daren't move you in case you could find something out. What happened?"

"I don't know. Some form of telepathic communication." Her thoughts were still scrambled. "Like the signal I received some time ago, but much more

powerful, much nearer. The other mind was more experienced than mine, which is why I couldn't cope with the transmission."

"Transmission?" asked Data. "As in communication?"

"Something similar," said Troi as she took her seat again, "but this operates even faster than our subspace. Whoever or whatever sent that message can transmit at the speed of thought itself, and for a considerable distance."

"Does it have something to do with that thing out there?"

"Yes, Captain. I believe the signal came from that object, but from who, I can't tell you."

"Data, can we get a communication channel to that thing?"

Data's hands, faster than any man's, were flashing over the console, seeking the channel. "Some telepathic frequencies and wavelengths are known sir, but are very difficult to match. One moment - I may have it."

"May have it, Data?"

"No, sir. Do have it. You have a channel. Audio only."

"Calling unidentified craft. This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise. Can we help in any way?"

A weak female voice answered, "Kaypi pisqantin kayku. Yanapawayku, allichu."

"Data, translation?"

"None available, sir. The language is unknown to the Federation."

Picard looked again at the object. "What on earth is it? Worf, can you beam it aboard?"

"Affirmative, but it might break up. I have locked onto the five life forms."

"Prepare to beam them aboard. Data, Number One, come with me. And you, Counselor; your skills may be needed."

Picard, at Worf's suggestion, took the precaution of drawing four phasers. In case of what, he had no idea. They arrived in the Transporter Room just as O'Brien energised the beam, and stood poised, not knowing what was going to materialise; the ship's computers, for all their sophistication, found the granite of the stone ship just a little too much. Whoever had chosen the stone had chosen well; the granite contained just enough pitchblende to interfere with the sensor beams of the Enterprise.

Amid a shimmer of light five figures began to materialise. Or were there five? From where Picard stood there was just a shapeless mass of coloured feathers; some golden-brown, some blue-white, chestnut and many white. Whatever these creatures were, they did not seem in the least bit humanoid.

Riker led the way cautiously, followed by Data. As they got nearer Troi said, "Be careful. They are exhausted and may do anything."

"What I want to know," said Riker, "is how in the Galaxy they managed to travel this far?"

Data carefully rolled one of the creatures over onto its back, and was momentarily surprised. A tangle of long black hair framed a woman's face, dark-skinned like an Amazonian Indian. She

wore a loose dark blue tunic and a cloak of woven white feathers. Her legs appeared to be fused together and the whole of the lower half of her body was covered in white feathers. She appeared to be lying on four half-spread blue-white wings.

The others had much the same general appearance. A willing mass of volunteers took them to Sickbay where they could be observed carefully. Picard and Troi went with them.

Once there Picard asked Dr Crusher what she made of them.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything quite like them. Whether they're naturally like this or the result of genetic experiments I can't begin even to guess. Their physiology's completely unknown and I dare not give them medication until I've conducted more tests."

"Carry on, Doctor." Picard turned to Troi. "And you?"

"They are conversing among themselves telepathically, but at such a low intensity and high speed I can't pick it up. I do know that they are still very frightened."

Picard's communicator sounded. "Yes, what is it?"

Data's voice. "I believe I may have found something about our mysterious visitors."

"All right. Meet me in the Observation Lounge with what you have. Picard out."

Shortly after, the bridge crew and one or two other key members of the

Enterprise crew were gathered in the Observation Lounge. "Did you say you knew what these were?"

"If my reading of the computer is correct, they are Venidana."

"What?" Picard was astonished. "I thought the Venidana were a myth, like Eldorado or..."

"The tooth fairy?" suggested Riker.

"Well, not quite the tooth fairy, but yes, like that. You're saying they're not?"

"Apparently they *are* known to the Federation. But Tierra Venida is a very long way from here, so how they came to be here I cannot even begin to conjecture."

"All right," said Riker. "Just what information do we have on Tierra Venida?"

"Precious little, sir. Tierra Venida is the native name of Epsilon Cygni V. Similar to Earth in size, Class M, oxygen atmosphere, gravity equal to that of Earth. The Venidana are peaceful but culturally at the equivalent of the Earth Bronze Age, with a good knowledge of metallurgy and stone carving. Physically they are approximately humanoid but the lower part of the body is feathered and they have wings, flight being their main and preferred method of movement. About a quarter have four wings and a further quarter are male; these have six wings and are called Qollanas. Among the Venidana there is a belief in magic and it is said that the kallawaya or magician has wonderful powers. There are seven known kallawayas; Auey, believed to be a god, Gloria, Chetia, Lita, Tina, Jacku, and Qori, all still living on Tierra Venida. They have not made contact as yet with other worlds, and space flight, if they are capable of it, is a

long time into their future."

"And that's all?"

"Yes, sir. The only contact has been satellite observation. They are a unique culture, not dissimilar to some of the more peaceful tribes of Red Indians on Earth and showing many of the characteristics of the ancient Inca civilisation."

"What will someone like that make of the Enterprise?" Geordi wondered, but no-one got any further as Beverly's voice cut through the silence. "Sickbay to Captain. They're waking up."

"I think we're about to find out, Commander. Number One, you have the bridge. Mr Data, Counselor, you're with me."

When Picard arrived one of the Venidana was half-awake, and looking round her with a strange mixture of fear and wonder. This was the tall one whom Troi believed had sent the message; she had almost black hair and four golden-brown wings. Her feathers were the ones which had covered most of the transporter platform when the Venidana arrived. Now they lay folded across the foot of her bed; they were very long. The Venidana's eyes glittered like sapphires as she took in the beds around her, her still sleeping companions and finally the four crew members standing beside her.

"Maypi kani?"

"What's she saying, Data?"

"I do not know. The Venidana language is not known in its entirety to the Federation and therefore translators will not work."

"Iman chay? Pi kanki? Maypi kani?"

The Venidana was frightened, more so at the sight of Picard. "Huelisquin! Mana wanuwankichis! Mana wanuwankichis!"

"What can we do?" asked Picard, "She seems afraid, almost terrified. But why?"

Hesitatingly the Venidana spoke again. "Pourquoi? A cause de je suis etrangere en pays qu'on ne decouvrirait pas." A pause. "I come here, seek help my people, find only more huelisquin. We try, we fail. You kill me now, quickly, the others before awake. Then we yours to do as you wish."

"Where did she learn Standard?" Picard was astonished. "And French!"

"I believe she may have scanned your mind, Captain," said Troi. "I know she scanned mine and has been listening to our conversation for some time. Her fear when she saw you may have something to do with why she and her colleagues are here."

"You could be right. Data, what do we know of a people called..." He could not pronounce the word.

The Venidana sat up and said, "Is word you seek 'huelisquin'?"

Data managed something resembling a smile; though he had worked for hours on the actual movements he still couldn't get it quite right.

"Huelisquin is the name given on Tierra Venida to any invading life form. The specific derivation appears to be from Old English waelisc, foreigner, and Nahuatl ending -in, plural. Both

languages Earth, ninth century old calendar."

"Do either of those languages resemble modern Venidana?"

"Checking... No, sir. Some of the words and grammatical structure appear to be from Incaic Quechua but that is all."

"Which gets us precisely nowhere." Picard at his best. "We know that something has frightened our friend and that that something is an invasion, but beyond that - nothing."

"I beg to differ, sir. I believe that we have learned much. True, we know that Tierra Venida has been invaded and we also know that the invaders are very much like ourselves. Obviously, from the reaction on seeing you, these huelisquin - " Data did not suffer the same problem with pronunciation - "have killed many of the Venidana, for what reason I do not, as yet, know. The five we found knew the only help could come from the same place the huelisquin did, the sky, and so that is where they travelled."

"But why only five?"

"I tell you," said the calm Venidana, and prompted Picard to call another meeting in the Observation Lounge. As they made their way through the corridors of the Enterprise she looked around with wonder. "This is building, yet it fly. How you do it? No, do not tell me, I know I not understand yet. That you here and help me is enough."

She moved with an easy grace, her four wings hardly spread, and with the briefest flick of the larger pair every so often. The long feathers were, at Picard's request, looped around one arm. When they reached the confines of the turbolift she finally folded her wings once more.

The movement caught her unawares, but she was prevented from falling by crashing into Data. That was when she realised that he was not the same as the others.

"You. You different. Ima?"

"I am an android, a machine."

"Yet you like others. You laugh, you think. I not see machine like you."

"Oh, Data's one of a kind," said Picard, not realising that perhaps the Venidana was too, and that from those few lines would grow a friendship which would transcend the very laws of physics.

The others were waiting in the Observation Lounge as Picard arrived. The Venidana declined the offer of a seat, saying that her flight feathers would get damaged, which was true, and took up what was to become the standard place for all Venidana aboard the Enterprise, leaning into the window recess with her wings spread slightly forward. She looked around the officers gathered in the room, her eyes lighting momentarily on Worf, judging his strength, before passing to the impassive face of Riker then back to Picard.

"Some of my people in great danger. We choose five. Huelisquin kill my people for eat, those like me, four wings. And Qollanas they bake slaves, all but one, he hide Ch'inkil phawchi, come with us. Seven meet, choose four go with him. Myself, Gloria, Chetia, Jacku. Others guard awkiq phaqsakuna, spirit-lights. If not return, they try."

"Four of the kallawayakuna," said Data. "The most powerful of their race."

"The Venidana believed that the

four kallawayas had enough power between them to find help?" Riker asked calmly. "And they sent you, just like that?"

"They send me, my companions. Let them sleep, they not know where they come." A broad smile. "Neither, for that matter, do I."

"This is the Federation Starship Enterprise. I'm Captain Jean-Luc Picard, this is my First Officer Commander Riker. Lieutenant-Commander Data you already know. Lt Worf, our Security Officer, Geordi La Forge, Chief Engineer; and Dr Beverly Crusher you know. And this is our Ship's Counselor, Deanna Troi."

The Venidana looked at Troi. "*I know you can hear me,*" she said telepathically. "*I felt you before we left Tierra Venida.*" Then to the others in normal speech, "I'm usually called Auey. My full name is quite impossible for you to pronounce, in fact even my own people find it difficult. Data, my friend, what do you know about me?"

Data hesitated. "Go ahead," said Picard.

"Auey is the name given to a kallawayaya of Tierra Venida. Her proper name is Qoriqoyllur Yachay Paqarina Jach'a Maillku, which translates in the Venidana language as "the great leader Golden Star, Morning Wisdom". Her age is unknown, and she is believed to be the source of all power and the first of her race. Most often she is accompanied by her daughters Gloria, Lita, Tina, Jacku or Qori, her son Ferry or her sister and messenger Chetia."

"Very good, but you got my name wrong. What it means is "the sun's messenger, the condor Golden Star, who brings wisdom in the morning."

"Additional information?" asked Picard.

"None available, sir," said Data levelly.

Auey's head lifted slightly. "I think my companions are awake. They will be as afraid as I was. Bring nothing which will frighten them, and do not approach suddenly."

At that moment Beverly Crusher's communicator whistled, followed by the voice of Selaar, her Vulcan assistant. "Dr Crusher, I believe your presence is needed. Your patients are awakening."

"On my way." Picard, Data and Auey went with her.

The remaining four Venidana were awake, and looking fearfully around them. With a slightly more powerful flick of her wings Auey landed between two who looked identical and reached out to touch them. One was the Venidana Data had seen in the Transporter Room, but he could not be sure which one. "Gloria, Jacku, mana mancharinkichis."

The nearer one spoke. "Maypi kayku?"

"Khumpakunantin, qoyllurkunapi."

"Hanan anqhaspi?" This was the further one, whose voice was older.

"Ari."

Auey turned to Picard. "Have you somewhere my friends can stay? They will cause no trouble to you."

"I suppose we could put them in guest quarters for the time being."

Auey nodded. "That is well. Jacku, yasaqtantin rinchis."

The elder one answered, "I not go with them, Auey, stay with you."

"Mana, Gloria, you too. There are many on this ship who would harm us if they knew we were here."

"You can't say that - " began Picard, but Data cut in.

"On the contrary, sir. I have just accessed the information on Tierra Venida again and discovered that a type of meat called aycha which comes from the planet is much prized among traders in this part of the Galaxy - somewhat of a delicacy, I believe - and consequently very valuable."

"What is it?"

"Aycha," said Auey heavily, "is the flesh of a Venidana."

CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE 43247.9 The problem caused by the five Venidana is now paramount. I have posted guards outside their quarters and have sent a message to Starfleet Command apprising them of the situation. Jacku and Gloria have taken over the main guest quarters and have made themselves very much at home. With their two companions they continue to speak their native tongue in order that the computer may log it for future reference. Auey, who in the space of a few hours appears to have mastered Standard, French, Vulcan and is now, with the help of Lt Worf, endeavouring to learn Klingon,, proves to be an enigma. She knows she desperately needs our

help but is somehow unwilling to request it. She continues to help Data to compile detailed notes for the computer on her people and culture. For a member of a culture so very primitive as hers is, it does not fail to amaze me that she accepts the Enterprise and all those aboard as if she had always known them.

At that particular moment Auey and Data were programming Holodeck 3 to recreate the conditions which had existed at the time of her leaving Tierra Venida, as that seemed to be the only way that the situation could be fully appreciated.

"Programme complete, enter when ready."

They stepped through the door to find themselves at the foot of a sparkling waterfall. Amid the boulders a Venidana stood guard over a collection of glowing spheres. As Auey approached, the Venidana knelt to touch Auey's wings.

"I have gathered the spirit-lights, Condor. I will guard them with my life."

"Sullpay, pachis. Now phaway, Lita, wayra-hina. I will stand guard here for a while."

The Venidana left, her golden wings merging into the sunlight bouncing from the trees all around. Data said, "She did not speak your language?"

"I asked the computer to create Venidana who spoke Standard. It is easier for you that way."

Phaser fire sounded in the distance among the trees. "Huelisquin!" whispered Auey. "Quickly, Data - if these

lights are found then my people are doomed."

"What can we do with them?"

"They must be hidden." She sat down on the ground. Data watched as Auey carefully separated her legs - her feet remaining fused - thus opening what appeared to be a pouch between them. "My people carry many things within their bodies. Quickly, help me with the lights."

The seven largest spirit-lights vanished into the pouch; when Auey stood again there was no trace of the cargo she was carrying. She and Data picked up four each of the remaining lights and quickly carried them behind the waterfall, where there was a rough-hewn cave.

"For a while they will be safe here," said Auey as she lifted the seven globes from her pouch, taking great care with a golden light and an electric blue one. "But they will be discovered."

From their vantage-point they watched as a Venidana with mahogany wings came through the trees, pursued by men armed with phaser rifles. Auey turned away as the Venidana fell, hit by phaser fire. "If I return to my land that is my fate," she said.

"Computer, freeze programme," said Data.

"Save it. It may be helpful."

"Save programme. Exit."

The door reappeared and they left, Auey somehow pleased to be once more part of the reality of the Enterprise. She turned to Data and said, "You try to be part of this world and yet you can never be."

"How do you know? I have not told you."

"There is no need. It is easy for a man to act as a machine but for a machine to be as a man... It is within my power but I will not do it. You are one alone; you must make your own way, even as I have had to. I am trapped between worlds, the world of the living and the world of the spirits, at that endless borderline where all things begin and all things end - in my language, paqarina." With that, Auey halted, folded her wings about her and vanished. Data was left with an image of those sapphire eyes.

Later that day Picard was in his ready room when Auey silently materialised by the door. With a flick of her wings she was at Picard's feet. "You are the last hope my people have. Help us - please."

A momentary silence. Picard touched Auey's shoulder. "I don't know that I can," he said, "but I'll do whatever's possible."

Once more in the Observation Lounge, Picard turned to Auey and said, "If we're going to help you then I think it's about time we knew exactly what you are."

"I'm not a Venidana, though I look like one. I was imprisoned in this form when I was exiled from my own continuum. I believe you have met one of my fellow-exiles."

"A fellow-exile of yours?"

"He was thrown out because he liked using his power to play foolish tricks on others without regard for the

consequences."

"And you?"

"My exile was by my own choice. I was allowed to keep my power, as I had stated that life in the continuum was too boring. They decided to make me work for things."

"You're talking of the Q, aren't you?"

"Ari, I am. You will note that my first name is Qoriquyllur."

"And your companions?"

"They are Venidana, but with some of my powers."

"Then surely you - or they - could sort this out."

"Ichaqa, but to do so would alert the huelisquin to my presence and that, as you say, would be dangerous."

"A Q has considerable power - " began Data.

"I think we all know that," said Riker with a smile.

"And if whoever has invaded Tierra Venida caught Auey they could use her power to their own ends."

Picard's communicator whistled. "Message coming in from Starfleet Command, Captain."

The face of none other than the Commander-in-Chief of Starfleet appeared on the screen in front of Picard.

"To what do I owe this conversation, Jean-Luc?"

"We have a slight problem, sir. We

picked up a small craft from Tierra Venida with five Venidana, well four Venidana and a Q aboard, who had come to seek help as their world had been invaded."

"Who by?"

"That we do not as yet know. Our problem is this. Will helping the Venidana constitute a violation of General Order Number One?"

"They have space flight capability, you say?"

"No, sir. Far from it. Their world is little known to us."

"Then I don't think we can intervene."

Auey spoke. "Admiral, I came because my powers are useless against the huelisquin. They kill my people without a thought. The Venidana have already been invaded once from space - a second invasion will not frighten them."

"If we get rid of the huliskin your people might make gods of us."

Auey winced at the mangling of the word, and replied, "That's unlikely. You see, before I left I told them that I was going to find help. Whatever help I bring will be from what my people, that is the Venidana, regard as being the world of the spirits, and they will act accordingly."

Auey had been given a communicator pin some time earlier, and she now tapped this. "Gloria, Chetia, hamuychis."

Two further Venidana materialised in the Observation Lounge and stood close together, speaking quietly in their own tongue. Gloria was the elder of the black-haired, blue-winged Venidana; like

Auey and Chetia, she wore a turquoise blue tunic. Chetia had chestnut hair, and two chestnut wings; in both could be seen glints of green and red. She wore a belt of gold, from which chains of jewels fell to the floor; the insignia of the messenger or chaski.

The Commander-in-Chief said, "All right, if you think you can get away with it you have my permission."

The screen clicked off. "Well, we've got permission," said Picard, "the question now is, how? Data, how far away are we?"

"Three days at Warp One, Captain, less at higher speeds."

"Can we get into orbit without the huelisquin seeing us?" Picard's pronunciation of the foreign word was improving, but still not perfect.

"Mana," said Gloria. "Huelisquin have eyes look out to sky, they see you."

"Mr La Forge?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Get yourself on the bridge and get Wesley to lay in a course to Tierra Venida, Warp Three."

"Yes, sir." Geordi stood and quickly left.

Worf spoke. "There must be a way to put them out of action."

"Ari," said Gloria, "but you need find where eyes are."

"Do you know?" asked Riker.

"I not know, huelisquin not tell me."

Auey spoke. "Then I will help you

search."

"Are you suggesting we pitch an away team into whatever's going on on Tierra Venida?"

"Ari."

Data spoke. "It would be a wise move, sir. Auey and I programmed Three to look like Tierra Venida. The Venidana desperately need our help."

Picard looked straight at him. "You've programmed a holodeck? Is the programme still available?"

"Yes, sir. I had it saved."

"Then I want the members of the away team acquainted with conditions on Tierra Venida before they go. Is that possible?"

"Yes, if Auey's memory is as good as it appears to be."

"Will, put together an away team. Include Auey, she knows her way around, and meet me on Holodeck Three."

"Yes, sir."

Signalling to the Venidana to follow him, Picard made his way to Holodeck 3, where he reactivated the programme Data had put in. As he stepped through the door to stand by the waterfall another Venidana detached herself from an almost hidden seat among the rocks. This one had glowing golden hair and feathers. "You came! You said you would!"

"Where are we?"

"The Ch'aya Phawchi, the meeting-place of the kallawayakuna. I'm Qori, I will be your messenger to my people."

"Auey, what kind of a trick is this?"

"No trick. My daughter Qori waits for my return by the waterfall."

Qori quickly vanished again to her place by the rocks as phaser fire was heard in the distance. The other Venidana stood calmly, but they too were afraid.

"Haku, we hide behind waterfall."

They led Picard to the cave behind the waterfall just as Riker's away team, comprising Worf, Data and Geordi, came through the door. Data showed the others to the cave and they watched, even as he had, as another Venidana, this one golden-haired like Qori, burst through the undergrowth. She stopped by the waterfall to throw one of her feathers into the pool at its foot, then continued her mad flight.

She did not get far. Even as she took off a phaser bolt hit her and she fell. Three tall men, armed with phaser rifles and wearing black uniforms, ornamented only by steel cuirasses and helmets, ran to where she was lying. One turned her over.

"This one's still alive."

"She knows where the kallawayas are. Before she dies, she will tell us."

"Mana, winayninkama," said the Venidana, and before anyone could do anything she drew a knife from her sleeve and drove it through her heart. This made the huelisquin surprisingly angry.

"What's going on?" Picard was confused.

"That was my daughter Lita. The huelisquin prize intact carcasses of aycha, those without a mark on them, as they

can be sold in one piece, for a higher price."

Riker shuddered. "Exit," he said quickly and the door appeared.

Once more in the Observation Lounge, Riker said, "We'll never pass ourselves off as Venidana."

"No, but it will be possible to disguise ourselves as huelisquin. Even Worf will pass as one under a helmet." This was Geordi. Worf contented himself with a sickly grin.

Riker called the Stores. "I want native costume to the pattern sent to your computer to fit the away team as soon as possible."

Stores said they would work on it.

"We can pass as huelisquin," said Geordi, "but Auey will stand out a mile."

Riker realised the Venidana would look out of place. "What about you?"

"I'm not that easy to find, even for the most talented of huelisquin. I will make my own preparations. Suffice it to say they - and you - will not know I am a Venidana."

Picard spoke. "You won't have time to do very much before the huelisquin find you."

"No, Captain. From what Auey has told me they have a very tight system of security."

"And that means we can't hide the Enterprise either."

"Suggestions, Number One?" Picard was momentarily baffled.

"I have one," said the Venidana. "That you make a short reconnaissance trip as huelisquin, then when the Enterprise cannot be hidden any longer, you go as yourselves. There will be no problems."

Picard had to admire the calm logic. Although Auey's people did not feel ashamed about emotion in the way that the Vulcans, for example, did, they rarely showed it; a calm smile or the occasional laugh was their usual response. But, as Riker pointed out, Auey and her companions were the most powerful of their race.

Troi's calm voice. "What is it, Captain?"

"I was just thinking - are Humans the only illogical beings in the whole Galaxy?"

"No," said Data, "in fact there are many illogical races. The Excalbians, the Ayrampu of Fomalhaut 3 -"

"All right, Data."

"I think what he was trying to say is that the Venidana are logical in their ways. More so than we are. It appears that as they train themselves to use their emotions less their powers of logic and of telepathy, telekinesis, etc increase. In many ways they are like the Vulcans but their powers are far greater."

Auey smiled. "Can you read my thoughts, Counselor?"

"I can try."

"I know your limits, I would not wish to hurt you again, even by mistake. But you will need my knowledge of the land, all of you, and I will not be able to help you like this."

"We'll send Troi with the Away Team."

"Mana, Captain. She will easily be mistaken for a Venidana and I will not allow that."

Picard dismissed the bridge crew. Auey stayed behind. "Captain?"

"Now what is it?"

"I need your permission to do something."

"What's that?"

"The Venidana kallawaya, which is what I have almost become, can separate mind and body. I request your permission and assistance to transfer my mind to the body of one of your bridge crew."

"Can you do it without hurting him?"

"I think so. He will not know I am there - or, rather, those around him will not. The Venidana will. And once I know what I am doing I can further guide your away team."

Picard began to distrust the Venidana. "Which of my crew had you in mind?"

"My friend, Lieutenant-Commander Data."

"You'll have to ask him as well."

They made their way to Data's quarters where they found the android sitting calmly reading a book at his usual speed.

"Hello, Captain. Is this a social

visit?"

"Well, sort of. Auey has something she wants you to do."

"And what is that? I am capable of most things."

"Data," said Auey, "what I want you to do is something I would only ask of someone I trusted very much. There are others aboard this starship whom I could ask and they would understand but I ask you as my friend. And as neither my language nor yours has a word for what I ask I must go to a third. The Vulcans have a word, *katra*, for that which is the essence of their being. I ask you to guard mine while we are on *Tierra Venida*."

"But I am a machine, not a person. How can I - ?"

Auey drew her wings about her and vanished. After a few seconds a glowing ball of golden light not much larger than a football materialised on the table in front of Picard. Auey's voice, clear now, spoke to them.

"Do not be afraid, this is my true form, and as such I cannot be destroyed."

"Pure energy?"

"Yes, Captain. Data, have you enough space in your memory cells for me?"

"I think so. But how will you find your way there?"

The glowing ball rose, hovered over Data, then settled to a gentle haze about him, and was gone. Picard said, "Data, are you all right?"

"Perfectly, Captain. It appears that Auey has done exactly what she said she would. I can distinguish her thoughts

from my own, she has not invaded all my systems."

"I'm remembering what happened last time you carried someone else's persona in those circuits."

"I do not think that will happen, Captain. Auey's only intention is to give the away team the benefit of her knowledge in the event that for any reason her body is destroyed."

"I see." Picard left.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE 43248.1 We are now orbiting *Tierra Venida*, just out of sensor range, according to Data. An away team comprising Commander Riker, Lieutenant-Commander Data, *Lts Worf and La Forge* and the *Venidana Auey*, in native costume, is preparing to beam down to the planet. What they will find there is anybody's guess.

Picard switched the log recorder off, turned to O'Brien and said, "You have the bridge."

Riker found the metal cuirass highly uncomfortable. For Worf the Engineering Section hammered it out in a few places but it still felt very heavy. Riker smiled when Worf put his helmet on; at least he did not look too much like a Klingon now.

Auey came in, wearing fine jewels over her shoulders and around her waist. A tiara sparkled in her hair, so tall that it added a good eight inches to her height, and from the top trailed golden streamers which, mixed with her hair, made it glitter. Had she wished to be in disguise

she could have done far better.

"Auey, what are you doing?" asked Picard as he entered the Transporter Room.

"This is the only way you will escape detection. The eyes of the huelisquin will be on me, dressed as a kallawayaya. You must stun me and fasten me to a pole in the manner of the huelisquin."

"I can't do that - " began Riker.

"I do not matter. I am expendable. You, I think, are not."

Reluctantly Riker turned his phaser on the Venidana. Data told him how to tie Auey so that they would not arouse suspicions.

The Transporter Room faded out and the surface of Tierra Venida appeared. They were by a sparkling waterfall and sitting at its foot were two golden-haired and golden-winged Venidana who did not flee on sight of them.

The elder, who wore a green tunic and a belt like Chetia's, said in halting Standard, "You must be from Enterprise. Ari. I not stay long. You travel this path, meet huelisquin ask password, say "Mana yachani." It Venidana, "I do not know." They think it big joke."

With that both Venidana took off and flew into the undergrowth. Riker looked cautiously along the path, then signalled to the others to follow him.

They had not gone far when a tall figure whose temper did not match his height stepped from the darkness and said, "Hey, you. What's the password?"

In his clearest Klingon accent Worf

said, "Mana yachani." The figure laughed. "If I didn't know better I'd say you were a Klingon."

Worf growled and the figure scuttled back into the undergrowth. Riker said, "That was useful."

"Neat trick, Worf. I'll have to learn that one."

The next sentry, picked out by Geordi long before anyone saw him, was not so easily convinced. "Where did you find that Venidana?"

"By the waterfall back there," said Riker.

The sentry was suspicious. "Oh, you mean the Ch'inkil Phawchi."

Riker was about to answer when Data said, "No, sir, the Ch'aya Phawchi."

"Oh". The sentry eyed the unconscious Auey with glittering eyes. She was a prize indeed. "Where are you taking her?"

Again Data beat Riker to the response. "You know what she is?"

"She looks like a kallawayaya."

"Yes, sir, that is why we have not killed her. She has much information we may be able to use."

Reluctantly the sentry let them pass, but not before taking a good long look at the away team. They carried on along the path to a tall building completely out of character with the Venidana buildings they had seen at intervals. Where they were of dry stones roofed with palm branches and grass, the building they now approached was smooth concrete, with glass windows and roof, and metal door-frames besides the mass of

pipework growing from one wall.

Data touched Riker's shoulder. "If we go through that door and Auey is still alive, Commander, we will not come out again."

"What do you mean?"

"The sentry we saw will have passed our description to his commanding officer, and told them that we have Auey. Now if what Auey has told me is correct, then they will expect us to get whatever information we can out of her before killing her. If we do not do that we too will be killed."

Riker felt uneasy. "But we can't kill her."

"Even my people would not kill an unconscious prisoner." Worf's words helped little.

Riker thought carefully. This was a position he never relished. To order any of his companions to kill the still-unconscious Venidana went against his nature. And anyway, who would he order to do it? Worf would refuse, so would Geordi. That left himself and Data, but besides being contrary to his programming, Data was Auey's friend.

"Hurry, sir, time is short."

"I can't kill her, her companions would never forgive me."

He had a brief sensation of Venidana laughter, followed clearly by the words, "Noqa qoyki, makiykiman".

Data said quickly, "If you cannot, then I will." The android reached for Auey's neck and with a short, surprisingly gentle movement, threw her head back. All the away team heard the subtle snap as her neck broke.

"Data, what are you doing?"

"Our problem is solved. We carry Auey's body to wherever it must go, and take tricorder readings of the inside of the building at the same time. We will be less suspicious this way."

Riker nodded. He made a mental note to have both Geordi and Dr. Crusher give the android a medical checkup when they got back to the Enterprise - if they got back to the Enterprise.

The sentries by the door, seeing Auey's broken neck, did not question the away team, merely directed them through the maze of corridors inside the building. Surreptitiously Geordi and Data took tricorder readings of the walls and doors. At intervals they saw Venidana, of a different race to Auey, shuffling along the corridors, some chained - their legs, though feathered, were not fused - and most with their wings clipped. And at the massively-built door in the far corridor, to which a tired and angry Venidana directed them, they saw five Qollanas, their wings nothing but ragged stumps, their feathers gone and standing awkwardly where their feet had been wrenched apart. According to Auey these five had been captured as a group and mutilated in this way as an example. Now only one Qollana remained, and he was aboard the Enterprise.

The Qollanas laboriously opened the steel door, and as the away team passed through it their eyes opened wide. Strewn everywhere were coloured feathers, and from the ceiling hung joints of pale brownish meat. Worf spoke quietly, "Sir, I have seen that before."

"So have I. Aycha. There must be millions of credits' worth."

Another Qollana, in much the same state as the others, said, "I see you've

brought another..." He stopped short as he recognised Auey. "I cannot accept this one."

The overseer, standing nearby and recognisable by the sash she wore - stolen from a Klingon officer, noted Worf with distaste - said, "Why's that, Venidano?"

"This is the body of one of our great leaders, our kallawayakuna."

The overseer laughed. "You hear that? You got a kallaway! You should be decorated for that!"

He threw the Qollana aside and looked at the body. "And without a mark. Beautiful! You can leave it with me. Better get some sleep, you'll have had a long chase for this one."

Unwillingly, Worf and Data handed Auey's body to the Qollana and the away team left. At the door the Qollana touched Data's shoulder. "I know what you do," he said. "Auey was my grandmother. Take this, it will bring you luck."

The Venidana pressed a single golden-brown feather into Data's hand. Geordi caught the movement and when they were out of earshot said, "What did he give you?"

"A feather, known to the Venidana as a quauhquetzalli, from Auey's wings. It is a symbol of protection and good fortune." He slid the feather carefully under his communicator pin, where it glowed dully against the golden shade of his uniform and the bright gold of the pin.

Like lightning the news of the capture of the kallaway had spread. The huelisquin lined the corridors, many holding Venidana who were forced to watch as the away team left the building.

But though the huelisquin were cheering, Riker was only aware of brief hostility among the Venidana. Some gently touched Data's arm, those who could reach without being noticed, others simply bowed their heads as he passed.

Every sentry had a joke for them, even to the point of one asking Worf how he had caught Auey. Worf answered with his customary angry growl.

At the waterfall the chaski met them. "You have seen inside their building?"

"Yes." Riker was trying to be helpful. "Tell me, er..."

"Qori. You have my mother aboard your vessel."

"Your mother?" Geordi was puzzled.

"Chetia. Like me, a kallaway."

"Qori, what were all those Venidana doing in that building?"

"Most were quauimeca and sach'aruna, the people of the forest. As you will have seen they do not have to fly as much as my people and so they are of no value for meat. But they make very willing slaves, as the huelisquin have discovered."

"And the Qollanas?"

"As Auey told you, that is their punishment. When the huelisquin found out where they were, each shredded the other's wings in order to make their bodies useless to the invaders. Their kallaway, Jeny, my nephew, made sure that they could not have any value for food or for breeding."

Qori sighed. "There were seven in

the cave. Five, and Jeny, sacrificed themselves that my brother Ferry might escape. The five had their ankles broken as a punishment; Jeny, because he knew how to do it, was given the task of killing the *venidana* caught by the *huelisquin* and butchering them. I see you have met him."

Riker was puzzled.

"Your friend. He carries the symbol of our resistance; the *quauhquetzalli*. But I think he carries something else too."

"Is that why the *Venidana* bowed to him?"

"Not for the *quauhquetzalli*," said Data. "They could not see that."

"Then what?"

"It is something I doubt if you will understand. It may become clearer later."

Once more aboard the *Enterprise* - and out of those cuirasses - Riker called a conference. As he and Picard entered the Observation Lounge, both stepped back in amazement. For there, in Starfleet uniform but with no insignia of rank, talking calmly to Data, was a dark-haired, dark-skinned woman who bore a striking resemblance to Auey. With them was Selar, Dr. Crusher's Vulcan assistant, listening intently.

"What in the Galaxy is going on?"

Selar made to leave but the crew-woman bade her stay. Data spoke.

"I thought it pertinent that Dr. Selar was here, sir. I think I need her help."

Riker looked straight at Data as he made his way to his usual place. "You're

right there. Why did you kill her? I thought that was against your programming."

"On the contrary, Commander. It seemed the logical thing to do."

"And besides," said the crew-woman in Auey's voice, "I asked him to."

Picard said, "Auey? Is that you?"

"Ari."

"But we left you on *Tierra Venida*."

"Mana. You left my *body* on *Tierra Venida*. I travelled with your away team, hidden within one of you. Or part of me did. Some has remained on *Tierra Venida* and while you were away another part created this new body for me, with a little help from my daughter Gloria."

In answer to the puzzled looks Data spoke. "That is why I needed the help of Selar. Auey had left her spirit -"

"Katra." Selar's voice.

"- *katra* in my circuits. That is why the *Venidana* bowed to me. They saw what the *huelisquin* - and you - did not. Geordi, did I not look different to you?"

"No."

"Then she is skilled indeed."

Auey nodded slightly. "If Data had my *katra* then it would be logical for him to kill my body."

Picard straightened his tunic. He was dealing with a power he could not understand. Was Auey the only *Venidana* able to do that, or could they all?

Geordi voiced the same thoughts.

"If the Venidana can leave their bodies and form others, like Auey can, why do they need our help?"

"They cannot," said Data, "Which is why the four kallawayas came to seek help."

Further conversation was interrupted by the intercom. "Picard here. What is it?"

"We're picking up a subspace signal from Tierra Venida asking us for identification." It was the voice of O'Brien.

"Blast! That's all we need. On screen, please."

The face of a woman, wearing helmet and cuirass like the huelisquin, her helmet decorated with a plume which Auey identified as sacred quauhquetzallin, appeared. She spoke slowly.

"And who are you? I do not wish to speak to the officers, I wish to speak to the Commander!"

"I'm Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise. What can I do for you?"

"They let you command?" The woman was astonished.

Riker, seeing the impatient look on Picard's face, said, "Where we come from it is not strange."

"Oh. We need your help, Enterprise. We have a slight problem."

"What's that?"

"The sentries report that there have been intruders in our building. Now we can't find them. We have good reason to suspect that they were Venidano Qollanas in disguise; they brought a

kallawayaya with them but we killed her. Now we need your help to find them. These Venidana are vermin; once loose in here they will destroy everything."

"May I ask who you are?"

"Commander Xochitl of the spaceship Aguai-W of the Battle Fleet of Deneb IV."

"Bandi," whispered Data.

"We came here in search of - er... necessary raw materials. And the aycha here is quite a delicacy in this part of the Galaxy; you must try some."

"I'll bring an away team, then perhaps we can discuss this further?"

"That would be very good, Captain."

The screen clicked off. Picard turned to Data. "What was that you said?"

"The mention of Deneb IV reminded me of the problems we had with the Bandi and their lack of respect for other life forms."

Picard groaned. "Oh no, not them."

"No, sir. I believe the Commander is of another race, but is equally cavalier when it comes to other life forms."

The last thing Picard wanted was another debacle such as that at Farpoint. There was the advantage that Q had not turned up this time, but as Auey was herself one of the Q that rather cancelled things out. *At this moment*, he thought, *I would rather be fighting a Borg battlefleet single-handed than dealing with this situation.* And on top of that he was getting a headache.

"Will, did you find out where the huelisquin's sensors are?"

"Yes, they're housed in a small building to the north of the main one."

Selar spoke. "I think I may be of help, sir."

"In what way?"

"Vulcans are known for their telepathic abilities." This was the equally unemotional Data. "Selar is suggesting a mind-meld with Auey in order to retrieve her knowledge of the building. I felt her mind scanning every inch as surely and as easily as a tricorder."

Picard nodded. Selar was able to operate the computer; Auey could not. Selar touched Auey's face gently; the fusion was swift and total. From their combined minds the plan of the huelisquin's buildings took shape. Along the corridor... At one end was a hall of some kind, then along the straight section past stores, guard room and communications to a junction down which were the water-purifying plant and the generators. At the end was the steel door through which the away team had gone and down the other side were the computer rooms. Main sensor arrays and sleeping quarters, as well as the canteen, were in separate buildings dotted about the near vicinity.

It was not Selar who broke the link but Auey. Sensing perhaps that the young Vulcan was tired, Auey, in her form as a golden light, silently returned to her own body, and brought Selar water.

"A tradition of my people, Selar."

Picard ordered the Vulcan to rest; it had been tiring. But now they had a rough plan. Geordi and Data fed the information from their tricorders into the

computer but it told them nothing which Auey's almost photographic memory had not.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, SUPPLEMENTAL. We have been invited to Tierra Venida by the Commander of the Huelisquin, and as she will listen to no-one else I am leading the away team.

The corridor faded into view. They were by the door nearest to the entrance, and it was open. From inside, the Denebian commander, dressed in a shimmering silver ballgown, welcomed them. "Ah, Captain Picard, you must introduce me to your companions."

"This is my First Officer, Commander Riker, Science Officer Data, Lt Worf, Lt La Forge and -"

"Paqarina Jach'amallku, specialising in the life forms of Tierra Venida," said Auey, "though most people call me Auey."

The Denebian's eyes glittered coldly. "I like it," she said. "You take the name of the great kallawaya of the land."

They were invited to sit around an oval table decorated with beautifully fine carving. Pieces of previous meals had become embedded in the work and ruined the design slightly. Auey glanced at Xochitl; as the Commander took her place by a section marked with a flower - *That's ironic*, thought Auey, because in Venidana "xochitl" meant flower - she sent Auey to the other end of the table where there was more food ground into the carving.

Xochitl clapped her hands and the meal was served. In deference to Auey a Venidana brought just fruit as an alternative. It took three Venidana to

bring in the main course; a complete carcass of aycha.

"As this is a special occasion I thought you might like to try the local delicacy."

"Aycha?" asked Worf.

"Not just any aycha. This comes from a kallawaya brought in the other morning."

With a flourish Xochitl tore a strip of pale-looking meat from the carcass and gave it to Picard. He saw he had no alternative and ate it.

The meat was surprisingly good, but the Enterprise officers refused the second helping they were offered, calmly but politely. Xochitl tore into it with obvious relish; even Worf was not that savage when it came to meals!

When the meal had gone, or rather when the aycha had been replaced by a mixture of Venidana fruits, Xochitl said, "This is a fine planet. Look around you."

They did. The room was decorated with tapestries and statues stolen from Venidana buildings; among them was a statue which, on a second glance, Riker recognised and pointed out to the others.

"Ah, I see you are looking at the jewel of my collection. This comes from the great temple, the Qorikancha, and represents the great creator god of the Venidana people, whom they call Paharina." There was undisguised scorn in the voice.

"Paharina," corrected Auey quietly.

"You do know something about these people. If I did not know better I might even say you were one of them." Xochitl clapped her hands and the

Qollana called Jeny brought a cloth in. Only Data's sharp eyes caught the movement between the Qollana and Auey. Xochitl snatched the cloth and said, "These jewels were taken from the body of that same kallawaya. But I think they will suit you more."

Auey suppressed a smile as the commander fastened the jewels about her shoulders and waist, before she untied Auey's long hair and set the most unusual tiara the Denebian had ever seen in it. Auey felt she wanted to shake her head, but she resisted the temptation. This was not the time.

"And these?" said Picard, indicating the tapestries around him. "Are they from temples and palaces?"

"Of course. The table we ate at is from what they believe to be the most sacred place on the planet. I, of course, do not believe in the superstitious rubbish these creatures believe in, but I must admit their art has a certain charm."

She ordered that another statue be brought in. This one was not of the quality of the other in the room, and was surprisingly like Gloria. Casually, Xochitl raised a hand phaser and set the statue afire. "But not all of it. That will make the room a little warmer, I think. Now, who will try some of the excellent brandy to be had on this little world?"

Silence, broken only by the clink of Xochitl's glass as she helped herself to the brandy. Riker sensed anguish and, on looking around the room, saw that Auey's head was in her hands - and suddenly so did Xochitl.

"What makes my little Venidana princess so upset? I merely destroyed a piece of substandard artwork."

No reply. At least none audible to

most of those in the room. Auey stood and with the briefest flash of her wings - or was it? - she was gone. Data spoke quietly. "Commander, Auey suspected that Xochitl knew she is a Venidana. Her reaction to the destruction of the statue betrayed her."

Riker already knew. Though much of what Troi had taught him had faded, sometimes he could sense things as well as she. Auey had been relying on this, and on her own telepathy, when she vanished.

Xochitl spoke again, in unintelligible Denebian, "Rehesape nboyoyava!" Then, calmly, "Now that our female guest has gone, perhaps I can introduce you to one of the delights of this planet."

At a signal six Venidana were brought in. These were of the race Qori had called sach'aruna, which the away team had seen in the corridors. As the officers watched, the Venidana danced to strange hypnotic music, weaving patterns of light from glowing balls held in their hands..

"The Dance of the Four Quarters, they call it," said Xochitl, "but I have put my own music to it."

As the dance ended the Venidana brought the strange globes to the seated officers. "Please accept these as a gift. They are called spirit-lights and each one represents one of the Venidana gods. For the Captain, silver - Wayna Qhapaq, ruler of the winds. Commander Riker, blue-white - the kallawaya Kamasqa or Gloria, second only to Paharina; Mr La Forge, deep red - Chawpi Tuta who could do all things. For Lt Worf, white for the warrior Willaq Uma and for our mysterious Science Officer, gold - "

"Paqarina, equally mysterious, ruler

of the spirits," said Data.

"You know?"

"I have learned something of the ways of the Venidana."

That served to annoy Xochitl. She was about to speak when Data picked up the sixth spirit-light and the Enterprise officers vanished - to their surprise as much as Xochitl's.

They found themselves in the Observation Lounge. Standing at intervals around the table were all five Venidana, or rather four Venidana and the silent figure of Auey, still in Starfleet uniform. The tall one called Gloria signalled to the officers to put the lights on the table. She it was who spoke.

"I recalled you, for I know the power of these lights. In the wrong hands they can be used to alter a person's thoughts."

"And Xochitl?"

"She is devious, Captain," said Data. "Where she used the spirit-lights to make slaves of the Venidana, she then intended to use their power to make us relinquish control and possession of the Enterprise in order to use it for her own ends."

"Which are?" asked Picard.

"I do not know," said Auey.

Gloria picked up the sixth spirit-light, a turquoise, almost electric blue, and smashed it, releasing a blue fireball which swept around the Observation Lounge before vanishing through the transparent aluminium of the window.

"The power of the sixth," she said, "is control of the other five. It was not chance that you were given these." Then

she spoke in her own language, "Hakuchis, mamaykuna."

"What are you doing?" Worf was not a little alarmed. "You saw what happened with the last one. I say destroy them now and get it over with."

The Venidana picked up one globe each. Gloria said, "There were once eight smaller globes and fifteen like these. The smaller ones were destroyed by my people when the huelisquin came. As they discovered the others the huelisquin destroyed them, believing the globes to be warning devices. By the time they learned what they really were, only six remained as they had been. And now, only five - the five guarded most jealously by my people."

"But why guard a ball of glass?"

"I will show you," said Data and broke the globe which Auey held. The golden light, for that was her choice, did not circle but remained motionless before vanishing. "Auey and her companions left a part of themselves in these containers to act as messengers. Now they are no longer needed and they may take that part back."

"Pachakuti," said Jacku, the other black-haired Venidana.

"What?"

"It is a Venidana word meaning 'what was, is again,'" said Data. "They know their battle is nearly over."

Even as they watched the lights faded from the globes. Slowly, carefully, Auey shook her head and once more became a Venidana. But she got no further, for as they watched, she became less and less distinct, until she was gone.

Gloria spoke again. "My apologies.

I believe the time our Condor spoke of has come. She has left us to return to her own world, broken the chains which held her to Tierra Venida. Yet she is still here somewhere. I do not understand."

Data's voice. "What she means is that Auey has left the Venidana to either help them as a Q or to let them fight their own battle this time. I would suggest that Jacku, Gloria, Commander Riker and I return to the planet and try to speak with the huelisquin."

Picard was not so sure but agreed in principle to it. The away team, unarmed, beamed down to the hall where Xochitl sat, with her armed guards.

"Hello, Commander. I've been expecting you. Well, what a gift you have brought!" Xochitl stood up and walked slowly around Gloria and Jacku. "If I am not mistaken these are the High Priest Gloria and her daughter, leader of the Venidana resistance, Jacku. Where did you find them?"

"We found him," said Jacku unemotionally.

"That doesn't matter. Take them away. Xochitl signalled and three armed soldiers stood by the Venidana.

Riker reached for his phaser... and touched empty air. Jacku laughed, then vanished. Gloria followed quite quickly.

"What is this?" Xochitl was more then annoyed now, she was furious. "How dare you play tricks on me!"

"It is not a trick, Xochitlitzin," came Gloria's voice. "I sought merely to defend myself."

With two Venidana loose - and temporarily invisible - Xochitl sat down, offered the others food and said, "What

can I do for you?"

"How long have you been on Tierra Venida?" asked Riker.

"Not long, about three Venidana months."

"Six by Earth standards," whispered Data.

"And you've reduced it to this?"

"Tierra Venida is a good hunting-ground. Aycha is expensive and valuable, so we have great riches in our hands. It takes much longer to catch the Venidana now, though. And when we do, they usually render their bodies useless to us."

"Is it worth continuing to hunt them?" asked Riker.

"I'm beginning to wonder," said Xochitl and that gave Data an idea. He quietly spoke to Riker while Xochitl poured herself more Venidana brandy.

"Sir, if we could remove the remaining Venidana then Xochitl would technically have no reason to stay on the planet."

"You mean beam up *all* the surviving Venidana?"

"I mean just that." He was aware of a presence by his shoulder and, on a second glance, he saw the hazy figure of Jacku. "That will not be difficult."

"Riker said, 'But so many?'"

"According to Jacku there are only about a thousand left, including those in this building. She has also requested that we beam up the decorations in this room as they are the heritage of her people."

"Where are the Venidana?"

"She will not say but requests that I find them. Or rather, that they find me."

"And Xochitl?"

"I think she will have a problem explaining this to her superiors."

Riker had to agree.

It was not as difficult as they had thought to locate the Venidana, as they seemed to assume that Data was their friend. But a thousand of them on one deck was quite daunting. Gloria and the others made themselves useful by trying to explain what had happened and by acting as points of reference for the understandably frightened Venidana.

On the bridge, Picard was trying to make sense of it all when a message came through.

"On screen."

"Captain Picard, I need your help." The anxious but otherwise calm face of Commander Xochitl.

"In doing what?"

"Can your ship's sensors pick out where the Venidana are? They appear to have gone."

"There are no life form readings of any size other than those of you and your people, Commander. Is it possible that you have hunted them all, and there are none remaining?"

Xochitl thought. "We did have the last lot of slaves killed... but I thought there were more."

Riker said, "And now there is no more aycha, no more Venidana."

The screen clicked off hurriedly. Data giggled, and that was when Picard had the first inkling of whose idea it really was. "Data, what are you doing?"

"Laughing, sir."

"I know that, but I thought you weren't capable of it."

"He isn't, but I am." It was clearly Auey's voice.

Riker smiled. "You mean to say you thought of this?"

Data answered. "Well, she put the idea to me and I worked out the finer points."

"And that's why you went to find the Venidana?"

"That is correct."

Auey's logic again. Riker smiled at the thought, the idea, of a logical member of the Q, which was a paradox if ever he heard one.

Data said, "Permission to fire main phasers at the huelisquin's building, sir."

"What on earth for?"

"In order to destroy the stocks of aycha they already have."

"Make it so." Picard would not be sorry to see the end of the aycha.

The warehouse disintegrated under the force of the enterprise's phasers. Again the Starship was hailed by Xochitl.

"Now what is it?"

"Request help. We are stranded here."

Data smiled. "I can assure you they are not. They have their ships, in full working order, not far from this building."

Picard asked for a channel to Starfleet Command and Data said, "That would result in a delay of three days at subspace speed, sir. Auey can make the contact far faster."

"Using the ship's communication system?"

"I think so, sir." Data's swift hands quickly sought out the channel he was looking for, guided by Auey's thoughts, to link her telepathic speed to Starfleet frequencies. "We have communication with Starfleet, sir."

"On screen."

An old friend of Picard's appeared on the screen. "Jean-Luc, what is the meaning of this?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"I have never seen a message transmitted quite like this one."

"A matter of urgency, sir. We have a Denebian colony on Tierra Venida who want to get home because they believe they have killed all the Venidana, and about a thousand Venidana aboard the Enterprise equally anxious to get home."

"Mm. Any other vessels in the vicinity?"

"Not this far out, sir."

"I'll send a message to Farpoint telling them the Denebians are on their way home, but they, and the Venidana,

are your problem. One more thing, how in the Galaxy did you manage to get instantaneous communication over *this* distance?"

"Call it friendly assistance. Picard out." He did not need to look to see the smile playing around the corners of Data's mouth.

A golden light appeared on the bridge, growing and slowly resolving itself into Auey. "Allillanchu. Thank you Data."

"Now look here, Auey - " began Picard.

He got no further because Worf said, "Unidentified craft approaching, sir, from Tierra Venida."

"Type?"

"It appears to be Denebian," said Data, "of a type I have not seen before. And sir, it is running with shields up."

"Worf, raise deflector shields."

A hum announced that it was done just as Worf said, "The ship is hailing us, sir."

"On screen."

The face of Commander Xochitl appeared, looking angry. "Enterprise. I believe you have several Venidana aboard. I ask you to let me take the vermin, but be assured they have an appropriate fate awaiting them."

"And if I don't?" asked Picard.

The screen clicked out, to be replaced by a view of Tierra Venida once more. From nowhere, it seemed, came a phaser bolt which shook the Enterprise.

"Denebian ships firing, sir."

What Picard said then is completely unprintable and extremely difficult even to translate from the French. Gathering his wits, he instructed Worf to return fire, but the Denebian ships were small and highly manoeuvrable. They might as well swat flies.

Data suggested that two of the three ships which were now visible should be disabled, perhaps by putting their engines out, and that one of those must be Xochitl's, or she would run and leave the others to their fate. After some internal debate Picard agreed.

"Lock phasers onto the engines of the lead ship."

It was a good shot. With a flare of disintegrating components and dilithium crystals, the Denebian's engines exploded, leaving the ship drifting. Xochitl appeared on screen again.

"What do you mean by this?"

"By what, Commander?"

"You have committed an attack on a friendly vessel."

"Oh no," said Data. "It was your ship which fired first."

If Xochitl had been a Klingon the sound which came from her would have been terrifying! Then the screen clicked out again.

Firing on the other Denebian ship brought no response, though Troi, in her usual place, said, "I can feel anger, unrestrained anger."

Auey smiled. "That will be Commander Xochitl. Not only have we deprived her of all the aycha she hoped

would make her wealthy, we have wrecked her ship as well. There will be a lot of explaining to do when she finally reaches home."

"How can you be certain they won't just turn round?"

Without changing her expression Auey shook her head slightly, and the Denebian ships vanished.

"Data, where are they?"

"According to sensors they are not in this sector sir."

"I forgot for a while that you were a Q. What have you done with them?"

"Merely sent them home. They won't be back for a very long time."

Gloria and Jacku supervised the return of the Venidana to their planet. In thanks, Picard, Data and Riker were invited to attend the first ceremony in the Qorikancha. They stood calmly, listening to the haunting sound of pan pipes and flutes as Gloria led the ceremony.

As it ended Jacku flew up to them. "Thank you all. Pachis. My people will remember your kindness."

"That's the last thing we want," said Riker.

"I do not understand."

Data said, "It is a rule of my people that we do not do anything which makes us the subject of worship or adoration by another people. We helped you because we were asked, but we do not wish to become gods to you."

Jacku laughed, and Riker

remembered that she was Auey's daughter. "Oh I assure you we will not do that. Do you see the statue?"

It was the same one they had seen in Xochiti's hall.

"Gloria went to your Maintenance Section and requested one of your brooches. It does not work, that was a part of her request. And now our statue wears it. Those of us who know its significance may remember, but to my people it is just another jewel."

"It is true, sir."

Picard looked again. Clipped to the statue's tunic was a Starfleet communicator pin.

"Well, I don't suppose that will break the Prime Directive. Thank you, Jacku. Your resourcefulness has saved me a lot of explaining."

Only Jacku saw them vanish.

Auey was sitting on the bridge horseshoe talking to Worf in Klingon when Picard and the others returned. Troi was trying to keep those long feathers safely out of everyone's way.

"I thought you'd gone back to your own continuum."

"I nearly did. You saved my adopted people, not me. How can I thank you?"

"We don't need thanks - " began Picard.

"I think I know how. My lloq'enchu friend, if you need me, wear my feather in your communicator."

"Your what?" said Picard as Auey finally vanished.

Could it have been the merest trace of a smile on the android's face? Certainly Riker had never seen those yellow eyes sparkle in quite that way. "Lloq'enchu" is a term of ridicule on Tierra Venida when used in ordinary speech. However, to some, like Auey, it is an honour. She, unlike most of her people, is lefthanded, which is one reason she chose to leave her katra in my keeping."

Neither Picard nor Riker quite understood what he meant, until Data calmly laid in course and engaged the engines...with a single flourish of his left hand.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE 43309.4. Having finally tidied up the problem on Tierra Venida we are now resuming patrol, though Lieutenant Commander Data seems reluctant to leave.

Troi said as much when she saw Picard later that day in his ready room. Also present were Geordi and Riker.

"What's caused this?"

"If I didn't know better I'd say Data has fallen in love with Auey."

"That's impossible," said Riker.

"They share many things," said Troi. "Simple things, but shared nevertheless. Both are lefthanded, for one, and both are outcasts of a sort. Auey is a Q trying to be a Venidana and Data an android striving to be Human. That there should be a rapport between them is understandable."

"But Auey's gone."

"And Data's suffering the android equivalent of a broken heart."

"No, I don't think it's quite that," said Geordi.

"What do you mean?" asked Picard.

"The other day he invited me to go to the holodeck with him. He's rewritten part of the Venidana programme to include Auey. It's not quite *Auey* he's pining for, it's something about her that I can't even begin to guess at."

"We'll have to hope this doesn't last long."

"I think I know," said Troi suddenly.

"What?"

"When Auey left her katra in his circuits she left something else. Her emotions. Don't you remember how Data laughed? Not his usual forced and obviously artificial laughter, but totally naturally? She granted his wish, but he never realised it until she had gone."

And Data never did realise that - for quite some time.

Worf growled with rage as he missed yet again. He had set the phaser range for lightning barrage and he was becoming progressively more annoyed as targets swept by him.

"Calm down, Worf," said Riker, who was having just as much trouble tracking the targets.

"You are allowed to say that, sir - you are not the Security Officer."

That made Riker grin. He wondered what he had let himself in for, asking Worf to test him on the phaser range. He remembered the last time he had been on the holodeck with the Security Officer, and how Worf had very nearly killed him. Tangling with a Klingon was not advisable if you wished to live for a while.

He wondered if he had made the right decision, but something had had to be done to keep Worf from, as he put it, 'forcefully disassembling' Data. And as Worf enjoyed target practice this was the best he could come up with. He had seriously considered getting the holodeck to recreate an image of Data for Worf to work his anger out on, but he did not want Worf to get hurt.

Wearily, Riker called up the scores. Worf looked displeased even though he had hit an incredible 38 targets compared to Riker's 32.

"What's wrong?"

"I had hoped to get forty this time."

They left the holodeck after a shower to change into fresh uniforms before they were due on the bridge. To Worf it had been relatively uneventful.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE 43311.2. We are on course out of our usual patrol area in order to investigate the break-up of the planet Iskay Qaywa due to intense volcanic activity of hitherto unknown cause. We hope to determine the cause in the event that such an occurrence happens again.

A golden-green planet appeared on the main viewer. At intervals flashes and

clouds of dust indicated volcanic activity. Data said that it resembled a boiling pot, which served to annoy Worf even more.

"Mr Data, sir, may I ask why you keep describing things so poetically?"

Data was at a loss for an answer.

"I would suggest that you keep your mind on the task, Mr Data, and stop trying to think of fancy descriptions."

Data quickly returned to his console, where he ran a sensor scan which showed no life-forms present.

"How long until it breaks up?"

"I cannot be sure. It will be stable for at least twelve more hours, but after that I do not know."

"Prepare an away team, Number One."

Riker just looked at the Captain. "You're going to send an away team into that?"

"We need all the information we can get, and I'm sure Starfleet Command will find tricorder readings taken on the planet's surface far more informative than sensor readings from a safe orbit."

Riker had to agree. He gathered his away team; Data, Worf, Geordi and Wesley Crusher.

"I thought it about time you had a taste of away team duty, Wes, even if it is on a planet which is about to break up."

Wesley didn't quite know what to make of that.

Picard saw them in the Observation Lounge. "I know it's highly unusual sending an away team to a planet like

this, but while it's still stable Starfleet Command wants as much information as possible about it, and this would appear to be the only way. However, if at any time you think you're in danger, beam up at once."

"What are we looking for, Captain?"

"Anything, Data. If it's there, record it for posterity."

The surface of Iskay Qaywa was dark and desolate. To one side the ruins of some kind of building stood out starkly against the reddish sky. The air was stuffy, pieces of volcanic ash drifted down all around them, and the ground shook spasmodically.

From the shelter of a nearby pile of rubble the last inhabitant of the planet watched them. He could not as yet discern details of the visitors, who were very strange to him, but evoked a racial memory within him, and looked interesting. And he knew that if they had the power or the machines to materialise people on the planet, they would be able to get him off it as well. But how?

He drew a wandering piece of protoplasm back to where it should have been - though how long it would stay there he did not know, as it appeared to have developed a mind of its own and if that were so he dared not risk leaving it on his planet - and slowly spread himself over a nearby boulder, inching ever closer to the visitors.

No two were the same. He noted the tallest, who appeared to be in command. If he had to assume the form of one of them what better than this one? Now, how to separate him from the others?

The ruins were extensive, and in many parts were fallen pieces of machinery of a type which none of the away team had ever seen before. Data and Geordi were ahead, looking for signs of the race that built them, but disappointingly could find no trace. They were about to go when the ground shook again, and a crack ran clean through the floor of the building. Pieces of rubble began to fall, and suddenly one massive door lintel came crashing down, pinning Worf beneath it.

Riker called Data to help, and they just about managed to lift the beam. Geordi's strength lifted it further, but it was down to Wesley to haul the unconscious Klingon to safety. As soon as they were clear, Riker hit his communicator. "Enterprise? Two to beam directly to Sickbay."

As Wesley and Worf vanished, Picard said, "What's going on, Number One?"

"We got caught in an earth tremor. Worf was trapped under debris."

"I'm getting you out. Transporter Room, stand by to beam the away team up now."

This was his chance. Get the tall one out of sight... yes...

Riker watched in amazement as Data and Geordi vanished in the transporter beam.

Aboard the Enterprise, nothing out of the ordinary was noted as Data, Geordi and Riker materialised and quietly left. In fact they did not notice anything until Picard asked Riker to report to him and the computer calmly said, "Commander Riker is not aboard the Enterprise."

"Then he must still be down there."

Data looked perplexed. "He beamed up with us sir."

"Apparently not." He tapped his communicator. "Number One?"

"Hello, Enterprise. I see you're still up there."

"Where are you?"

"Exactly where I was when you beamed Geordi and Data up." Picard wondered what was going on, and nearly jumped when the turbolift door opened and Riker stepped through.

"Captain?" Riker's voice through communications.

"Transporter Room, can you get a fix on Commander Riker?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then beam him directly to the bridge."

"Aye, sir."

Amid the shimmer of a transporter beam Riker materialised. But was it? There were two William Rikers on the bridge, and as yet no way of knowing which was the real one.

Data spoke. "Obviously one of them is our Commander, but I am at a loss to say which."

"Can you scan them both for life signs?"

Data did so. "Both are identical."

The second Riker spoke. "Captain, what is this?"

Picard looked at the first Riker. "Do you mind telling me what you are?"

"My name does not matter. I am the last inhabitant of Iskay Qaywa and I needed to board your starship in order to escape. My apologies if I caused you any confusion, but it was necessary to take the form of one of your people in order to accomplish this."

Riker smiled. This was going to be fun. "And now you've left your home planet?"

"While the planet exists I will be trapped in this form - its magnetic field holds me. When the planet breaks up I will return to my own form or to any other that you request me to."

"So while we're in orbit we'll have two First Officers." Picard smiled. "This is going to be very interesting."

Riker - the real Riker - had to agree.

Data suggested that the entity, who under much pressure revealed his name as Coatl, stay as much out of sight as possible, and so Picard had Data take him to the guest quarters on Deck Seven, well out of sight of most of the remaining crew members, and told him to try to stay there. Coatl agreed but said he would like to see the ship sometime. Data was not so sure.

He got back to the bridge in time to hear the voice of the Captain of the USS Lexington hailing them.

"On screen," said Picard.

"Enterprise," said the Lexington's Captain as he appeared on screen, "I've collected a crew member of yours by mistake."

"How did you manage that?"

"It appears she boarded with a friend and forgot to beam back ashore at the last Starbase. I'm surprised you didn't know."

"We did. Presumed she had another posting."

"Oh. Anyway, can you collect her?"

Thank you, Lexington." Riker's voice was heavy with sarcasm. What was wrong with the woman that the Lexington seemed so anxious to be rid of her?

Picard asked what the newcomer's status was.

"An ensign, a very unusual one by all accounts, assigned to astrophysics. She knows nearly as much about the universe as our computer - or your android - does."

"Mr Data, you'd better meet her and assign her quarters."

"Yes, sir."

As Data made his way around the ship to Transporter Room Three, the Lexington prepared to beam the ensign across. It was unusual for any crewmember to go missing - how this had really happened was anyone's guess.

A Ship's Services ensign - not a science officer - materialised and waited for the shimmer of the transporter to stop. She was tall and slender, dark-skinned with sapphire eyes and long, dark-chestnut hair which, despite being tied in a high tassel, reached below her waist. Data took a step back. He thought she looked vaguely familiar.

"Ensign Paqarina Jach'a Mailku

reporting for duty, Commander."

"Ensign? I will show you to your quarters."

"I cannot go there, Commander. Please, do not question me, I must first report to your Medical Officer."

"Are you ill?"

"Ma... No. It is imperative that she know something about my people. Something which will be important."

Data directed her to Sickbay and returned to his position on the bridge, still unsure whether he had seen the Ensign before or not. He seemed drawn to her, almost against his will, most unusual for an android.

Picard was by now worried. What was it about the Ensign that the Medical staff needed to know? And what of Coatl lurking in the guest quarters? With Worf unable to carry out his full duties as Security Officer - having suffered a couple of broken ribs when the lintel fell on him, and Dr Crusher had told him to take things easy for a few days - the Captain felt uneasy.

All these thoughts were cut short by Worf's voice. "Captain, the magnetic field of the planet is in flux."

Data checked the panel. "Collapse imminent, sir."

"Mr La Forge? Get us to a safe distance."

"Aye, sir." The engines surged as the Enterprise cleared the ever-increasing gravitational field of Iskay Qaywa before the ship could be trapped by it. Amid a shower of debris the planet, its internal energies spent, imploded and then turned to flying, glittering fragments.

The turbolift door opened and Coatl, still in the form of Riker, stood there, looking at the debris of his home world. "And now I am free to go where I will, to take what form I will. That is something I must learn to do."

"What are you doing here?" demanded Picard.

"I was... bored in my quarters. I wished to see my home planet again."

Even Picard could not be angry about that.

Data had gained valuable information about the collapse of Iskay Qaywa, and was now channelling it all into the computer as well as filing it in his own memory cells. "Inquiry. Coatl, if you are the last survivor of your planet, why did our sensors not pick you up?"

"Perhaps because I am not quite as I appear. I take whatever form my companions would be most comfortable with, as my own is rather strange. And I must soon seed myself, that my race may continue elsewhere."

"How do you do that?" Data's curiosity as an exobiologist was aroused by this statement. "I have never heard of your people before."

"You will see, Commander." Coatl left, to return silently to his quarters. There, he took on his usual form, glowing orange and completely formless, and let the wandering piece of protoplasm go its own way. He spread himself as thinly as he could, and let pieces break off before pulling himself back together and once more becoming the double of Riker. All around him were tiny shapeless, orange blobs, each of which could become a creature like himself.

The door sounded. "Enter."

Riker stood there. He looked at the glowing blobs scattered about the deck, some animated and making their way to various parts of the room, others still and pulsating. "What's going on?"

"I have seeded. Each of these will grow into a Qaywan like myself, eventually, but I will have to take care of them until they can change their form at random. And they are pretty fast movers when they decide to be."

Riker tapped his communicator. "Captain?"

"What is it, Number One?"

"We have a slight problem in Coatl's quarters."

"Specify."

"He's reproduced. There must be about fifty little blobs of jelly wandering about his quarters."

"What?"

Data turned to the Captain. "Sir. I think we will have a problem containing them, as sensors cannot locate them, unless Coatl has a way of taming them."

"Have you?" asked Picard.

"It is a tradition of my people to let them make their own mistakes. If they are not trampled or eaten, they quickly learn what they must do in order to survive."

"Can we confine them to your quarters?"

"I doubt it - you can't confine me."

In Sickbay, Dr Crusher and

Counselor Troi were talking to the new Ensign. She had made her way there as soon as Data had left her, and was trying to explain the reason she had come.

"I'm not what I seem to be, Doctor. Run a check over me, you will see."

Dr Crusher did so. "I'll agree about that. You're basically humanoid, but I've never seen such a high heart rate, low blood pressure, high body temperature or slow respiratory rate anywhere. You've bones where they shouldn't be and double shoulder and hip joints. What are you?"

"I can't tell you yet. If you have time, run those figures through the main computer. It should give you the answer."

"No time like the present." Beverly promptly sat down and did so, and drew a blank. "Computer, run those figures again."

"Working." This time the strange combination tallied. Beverly looked at the screen in disbelief.

"What is it, Doctor?" asked Troi.

"According to this our Ensign is a Venidana."

"As you can see, I'm not. Or, at least, not to the rest of the crew. I have been recognised already, though fortunately he hasn't made the connection yet. But he will."

Troi looked very confused. "You are Venidana, yet you say you're not. I can't read you at all." The mental block dropped and Troi saw into the Ensign's mind for a brief second. "You're telling the truth!"

"We've met mentally before,

Counselor. I knocked you out!"

Troi thought. "Qoriquyllur Yachay Paqar....Auey!"

"Ari. I'm back."

"As an Ensign?"

"You'll be needing me, I think. Even as I hid among the Venidana, I have come to hide among you. But my journey through Starfleet Academy has tired me, more so because of my forced journey through time in order to arrive here at this moment. I would have only you two know of my identity, and let me sleep here, as I must now regenerate myself. This body has reached its limit."

"It's highly irregular..." began Beverly.

"If I have a place to return to where I know I cannot be disturbed, then I can rebuild my body. Otherwise I must leave the ship and return when that task is accomplished."

Beverly finally agreed, after much persuasion. She did, however, make a point of calling the Captain to see her new patient.

"What's the problem, Doctor?" asked Picard as he came through the door.

"It's not a problem. I'm just not used to crew members asking if they can stay in Sickbay."

"What do you mean?"

The Ensign spoke. "Ensign Jach'a Mallku reporting, sir. I requested permission to stay here as I must have somewhere to rest where I will not be disturbed. I have reached a particularly difficult part of the life cycle to which I

was sent, and to be observed during that time is against my taboos. The only one who may see me is the one I have chosen as my wayqe, my spirit brother, and that person already knows."

Beverly spoke then. "She must rest and rebuild her body. She says it is worn out, and I believe her."

"This is highly irregular, but I suppose I can allow it. One question, Ensign; who is your wayqe?"

"I do not have to tell you, sir. You will soon know, however."

Riker and Coatl had rounded up thirty of the blobs when Data came into the room. He could not tell which was which, and so Riker spoke carefully. "Hello, Pinocchio."

"Commander. What is going on?"

"I'm trying to round up Coatl's offspring. Can you see any of them?"

Data looked. Those he saw retreated quickly. "They appear to be afraid of me, sir."

Coatl spoke. "Yes, they will be. Until they reach adult state they are sensitive to electromagnetic radiation."

"That would include the emissions from my positronic brain," said Data, "and if that is so, could we not contain them within some kind of electromagnetic barrier?"

"I suppose so. But a normal force field won't work, I've tried it. You'll need someone who can work with frequencies down to decimal points."

"And anyway," said Riker, "where

can we get electromagnetic field generators of that strength - and more importantly, to fit in this room? Most of the ones I've seen are enormous."

"I believe one was built using polarised light -"

"That's no good. Light, yes, but it must all be the same wavelength. Mixed wavelengths are no good, they'll find gaps." Coatl obviously knew what he was saying.

"And what colours would you suggest?" said Riker.

"Yellow or green. Even I am slightly sensitive to green light, so they will be."

"A light generator. It sounds simple, but to create the field depth required would be a challenge."

"I'll help you as much as I can."

Leaving Riker to guard the blobs, Data took Coatl to the computer terminal in his quarters, where he settled down and asked for information on light-wavelength force field generators.

"Working."

After a short while the words flashed up on the screen. Coatl asked Data to slow the scrolling a little so that he could read it.

Force field generators (light frequency) - a device to create a field of visible light wavelength and frequency around a given object, on same principle as force field proper. Depth of field has until recently been impossible to control accurately until the development of the copper-tumbaga based light field coils by Q.Y.P. Jach'a Mallku during studies at Starfleet Academy Stardate 43202.1

"Developed by who?" asked Coatl.

over the guest quarters," said Coatl.

"A very talented astrophysics student," said Data, "now an Ensign assigned to a Starship."

"Light?"

"Can we find him?"

"Yes. Light is one of the few things to which they are sensitive."

"Computer."

The Ensign sat up. "I can build you one. Any specific colour of light?"

"Specify."

"Green."

"Current assignment of Ensign Jach'a Mallku." The name began to sound vaguely familiar.

That made her look puzzled. "Copper filaments. Difficult with the use of copper-tumbaga coils as well - too much conductivity - but I think I can help. I'll need specialised help from someone with a good knowledge of how this ship's systems work." She looked at Data. "Lieutenant-Commander, I believe we have met before. You might be the right one."

"Currently assigned USS Enterprise."

The new Ensign! Of course! "Can you tell me where she is?"

"Ensign Jach'a Mallku is currently in Sickbay."

Data flicked the console off and both he and Coatl made their way very rapidly towards Sickbay.

She then proceeded to give a list of items and components she would need and explained that the generator must be set up in the place where it was to be used. Building it elsewhere was not advisable due to various electromagnetic fluctuations and anomalies within the ship, any one of which could affect the working of the device. "I'll see you at the guest quarters in fifteen minutes."

Beverly Crusher met them, and asked what they were doing.

"I have come to see Ensign Jach'a Mallku."

"She's resting at the moment."

By that time the blobs were crawling everywhere, and had grown, with help from Riker's feeding them a Qaywan delicacy, a revolting food called awakutl which resembled congealed insect eggs - and very probably was.

"It's all right, Doctor, I can see the Commander."

Gaining entrance was the first problem. Was there a blob by the door? Data tapped his communicator.

Data went across to where the Ensign lay, her hair now loose, a dark-brown cascade covering most of her body. "I think you can help us."

"In what way?"

"Data to Riker."

"We need to build a light-field generator in order to trap certain - er, entities which are currently crawling all

"What is it, Data?"

"I am outside the door, sir. Is it safe

to come in?"

"I'm doing my best to keep them away from the door but you'll have to hurry up. Riker out."

Hurry they did, and unloaded the equipment into the centre of the room. Data and Coatl cleared the furniture as Paqarina (as the Ensign said she preferred to be called) began to set up the light generator.

Suddenly there was a loud hum and a brilliant green flash, followed by a perfect box made of intense green light which materialised in the cleared area. A change of calibration and the top of the box vanished, leaving the walls, as thick as a man's forearm.

Riker tried to move them, but they were as solid as any normal force field. "This ought to keep them in."

Coatl apologised as he covered his eyes. "As I have said, green light does not agree with me."

Data suggested rounding up the blobs. This proved to be more easily said than done, for some were beginning to learn the metamorphic powers of their species and looked like objects in the room. In fact, a concentrated search only found seven of them.

Data suggested looking for them outside the visible light spectrum, to which Riker called for Geordi to help. If he couldn't see them, nobody could.

"What's the problem, Commander?" he said as he came through the door.

"We have a room full of... things... which can change their appearance, and we can't find them. Can you?"

Geordi looked at the blobs which

had been caged. "An interesting pattern, like a ten-point star. Yes, I think so. Data, can you pick up ultra-violet light?"

"I can, but they are afraid of me."

"Looks like I'll have to do it then." Geordi looked carefully around the room, picking up odd objects; a pine cone here, a pebble, a piece of cloth. These he threw into the light cage and they turned into the tiny - or, rather, not-so-tiny - blobs. There was, however, the problem of the chief blob, and he was very hard to find.

Eventually Geordi found him, disguised as a cushion... and Riker had been sitting on him. Among the others there were some disguised as pieces of carpet and marks on the furniture.

When they had all been rounded up and the lid put on the box, Data asked Coatl why his species had evolved such a strange talent.

"Oh, that goes back a very long way. At one time we were not much different from you, and indeed it is one form we prefer, though there are others. But then those of us who were in charge of research in the city began to experiment with heat from the planet's core. We managed to harness that energy to run our city, when without warning a volcano exploded on the other side of the planet and all that harnessed energy was gone. From that one eruption the climate changed; we suffered extremes of temperature, floods, droughts."

"I do not see how - "

"This went on for many centuries, and over that time we became more and more adaptable to the places in which we lived. But these places became fewer and fewer until those of us who remained attained this form and could become anything suitable to live in the terrain.

Now my few companions are gone. Our method of reproduction became simpler because it had to be."

"And what happened to their children?"

"The planet's instability caught most of them before they reached adulthood. The others suffered from light exposure. None survived."

Riker spoke. "So you know something about what happened to the planet?"

"I suppose I do."

In the Observation Lounge Picard looked impassively at Coatl, who had by now assumed a more standard form, almost nondescript. "I still think he looked better as you, Number One."

Coatl responded by returning to his impersonation of Riker, but he did make one or two alterations; brown eyes and slightly less immaculate hair, also of a lighter brown than Riker's, likewise the beard and moustache.

"All right, what do we know of the break-up of Iskay Qaywa?"

Data spoke. "According to sensors the planet's crust lost its integrity because it had been turned into a honeycomb of passages through which the geothermal energy was channelled. One of the heat-exchange barriers by which the molten rock was kept at bay broke and the underground passages filled with magma. This worked its way to the surface through all the power stations and by that time -"

"Long before then we'd lost control of it. It grew. What do your people say?"

Sow the wind, reap the whirlwind? That's what my people did. It cost them their lives... and their planet."

"Geothermal energy?" Picard was astonished.

"Yes, sir," said Data. "That was the reason for the break-up of the crust, and as soon as that had been broken there was no reason for the rest of the planet to stay together."

"There are dozens of planets using geothermal energy."

"Yes, sir, but not in the way my people did," said Coatl. "They became greedy, they wanted more. I tried to warn them but none of them would listen."

"You tried to warn them?" asked Riker.

"I did." A long pause. "You see, I'm Chief Technician Coatl Xacalatzin of the Cuiclahuac Power Station and Research Centre in the main city of Iskay Qaywa - head of the research project."

"You were responsible - ?"

"Only for developing the equipment. After that there were many greedy people who got their hands on my work and exploited it. I knew it had to be strictly controlled or it would destroy us, but they would not listen to me."

Data felt forced to agree.

"What do we do with you now?" said Riker. "You're homeless, you and your offspring, and no self-respecting Starbase would have fifty-three of you on it - at least, not all at once."

That made Coatl laugh. "Then perhaps your Starfleet Command could

find a planet for us, not too bright. The temperature and climate do not bother us, and we can adapt to an oxygenless atmosphere if we must."

The message was sent, and while awaiting a reply, Riker and Geordi took Coatl to the heart of the ship, Ten Forward. They were surprised to see Data and Worf talking with the young Ensign who had built the light generator, and out of curiosity joined them.

"Are we interrupting anything?"

"Hello, Commander," said Data, "Paqarina was telling me her theory of inter-continual travel."

"Inter-what?"

"I say," said Paqarina, "that there is far more than this continuum and subspace or warp space. There is, for example, the domain of the Q, and that continuum which exists in wormholes. It should be possible to travel to these and more as easily as you do through warp space - and, I believe, through time as well."

"There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man..." began Data absentmindedly

"What?"

"Something I think I read, Commander."

"Those were mighty heavy words for an Ensign straight out of Starfleet Academy," said Geordi. "Look out, Commander, she's after your job."

The Ensign looked out of the window at the starfield hurtling past, and to no-one in particular said, "Can you imagine the whole of this as your playground, to do whatever you wanted

with? That's what the Q say it is. Or to be able to halt time for long enough to be able to avert a disaster."

"You're talking like a Q now," said Geordi. "But a nice Q, and that's rare."

"That's impossible," said Guinan as she brought a tray of drinks. "I know the Q, they're all the same, mad, bad and dangerous to know. There *was* an exception but they threw her out of the continuum."

"What for?" asked Paqarina, "Good behaviour?" and that made them all laugh. Except, of course, Data.

"Is it the being thrown out which makes this joke funny?"

"No, Data," said Paqarina, "it's just that most people are thrown out of things for bad behaviour, and so it sounds funny that someone should be thrown out of something for good behaviour. And anyway, Guinan, I thought the Q concerned left of her own accord."

Guinan smiled. "You know a lot for an Ensign. My people can tell if there's a Q around, and I don't like any of them. I'm glad you're not one."

No-one saw the faint smile on Paqarina's face. If she could hide from Guinan then her secret was safe. "One minute, Guinan," she said. "May I speak with you alone?"

"Of course."

They found a vacant section of bar. Behind them they could hear Riker and Worf trying to persuade Coatl to join them for a game of poker, with Riker almost guaranteed to win.

"What do you want me for?"

"You've slipped up, Guinan," said Paqarina.

"How do you mean?"

"What Starfleet Ensign would know anything about the Q Continuum, or that Qoriquoyllur was flung out by her own request? Have I even fooled you?"

"Auey?" Almost a whisper.

"Ari. But keep it quiet. You would have known sooner or later, it is better that I tell you myself. Then you'll know how to avoid questions about me."

"You're just as devious as the rest of your continuum." Very nearly a joke but with a ring of sarcasm.

"Mana. It was a condition of my leaving that I hide among the lower ranking members of any entity whose form I take. Among the Venidana I was originally an Aklla, a temple servant; here an Ensign. My identity must not be known unless my power is needed."

"And who knows who you are?"

"You, Beverly, Deanna Troi... and, though he hasn't quite put the pieces together yet, Data."

"And how long do you seriously think you can keep this up?"

"As long as I must."

"All right. If you hadn't told me you could have got away with it. But I'd suggest you keep out of the way of the Q who plagues this ship."

"Oh, I know him. I've nicknamed him Q'oronta which means "used corncob", implying that he's no use whatsoever. I can tell you he doesn't like that in the least."

"He wouldn't."

Auey smiled and that made Guinan laugh. "Anyway, Auey, what are you really doing aboard the Enterprise?"

"Fulfilling an obligation to the continuum. They're tired of Q'oronta as well, and I'm under orders to stay with the Enterprise until he decides to show his face, then I must capture him. I'm allowed to humiliate him a little first, though."

"Catch a Q?" Guinan was astonished. "How?"

"The same way I was. Refract him into a dilithium crystal." She reached into the collar of her uniform and brought out a long, slender, glittering crystal of pure dilithium, which hung on a platinum chain. "This will keep him out of the way - for a while at least."

Geordi's voice. He had caught sight of something. "Paqarina?"

"Yes?"

"That's some jewel you're wearing."

"Thank you,"

Riker grinned. "At least show it to us properly."

With a smile to Guinan the Ensign left the bar. Geordi took the offered crystal, turning it in the light. "I've never seen anything like this."

"What is it?" asked Riker.

"It looks like dilithium but I've never seen it that pure."

"Oh so that's what it is. I've been trying to find out for ages." Paqarina smiled. "Thought it was a rare rock

crystal."

"If this is pure dilithium," said Data, "then it is very valuable."

"Look out, Ensign," said Worf, "or Geordi'll want that for his warp engines."

Paqarina turned. "You really think it's dilithium?"

"I'm as sure as I can be."

"I've a few more in my bags, perhaps you might like them?" With that she left.

"Dilithium crystals?" said Riker.

"It would appear so."

Data suggested that they see if that really were so. When they arrived in Sickbay they found Paqarina's bed strewn with flawless dilithium crystals. With her blessing they were appropriated for use as spares for the warp engines; neither the engineer nor the android saw the twinkle in the Ensign's sapphire eyes.

In Engineering Geordi asked, "Where did she get these?"

"I do not know," said Data, "but they are of a quality not found on any of the worlds we know of, or even of those crystallised synthetically. I am at a loss to explain them."

He did, however, return to sickbay later to question the Ensign, who was by now extremely tired.

"Hello, Commander. What brings you here?"

"A question. Where did you find the crystals?"

"On my journeys. I can't remember

where. Thought I could sell them as cheap gemstones. Never quite realised what they were."

"And you an astrophysicist?"

"We all make mistakes, Data."

Somehow, the Ensign seemed less remote the instant she used Data's name. He knew there was something familiar about her but he still couldn't quite remember what. It never occurred to him that Auey herself might have blocked his memory after their last meeting until such time as he must know who she was. She hoped she would not have to keep the access denial code there for much longer...but could she trust Data to keep a secret?

Beverly interrupted her train of thought by elbowing the android aside and running a tricorder sensor over Paqarina. "You're getting worse. Data, don't make her work too hard, will you?"

"I was not aware that I had, Doctor."

Beverly smiled. "Don't worry." And she left.

In her much weakened state Paqarina thought the time had come to let Data know. Of all those on the Enterprise, the android was the best choice to witness her transformation, however it was to be. He could remember and record much more than any man, and more importantly he would never forget it. And they shared a link. When they were on Tierra Venida, Paqarina's memories had been in Data's circuits. Not only had he shared her knowledge, but for one all-too-brief moment, her feelings as well. The Venidana Q had granted his wish but he never realised it.

Paqarina took away the block in his mind, in a snap decision. "Data," she said

calmly, "do you know me?"

"I do not think so."

"You said you thought we'd met before."

"That is correct." The information came to him. "Here, aboard the Enterprise. Some time ago, but you did not look like that. A Venidana... Auey? Is that you?"

She laughed. "Ari, it is. Do you still have my feather?"

"Of course." Data was puzzled. "Would it not be better to tell the Captain you are aboard?"

"Mana. He knows there is a rather unusual Ensign aboard, but that is all. Some of the crew know me but I think it better he doesn't until my powers were needed again. Remember the problems caused when other Q have been aboard?"

Data needed no reminding. "Why have you chosen to tell me?"

"I chose you last time as my wayqe, when you took my katra into your memory cells. Thus in Venidana tradition the wayqe is with the Venidana sorcerer at important times in her life. I have reached one. Watch me carefully, you may never see this again."

It was to be a long night for the Second Officer as he sat by the Ensign's side. She lay calmly, gazing at the ceiling, her energy almost gone. After a while the illumination over the bed seemed to change to a soft golden glow, similar to but not the same as the Venidana spirit-light Auey had shown him. Then it changed again to an intense, almost magnesium white, which etched the

details of Sickbay in black and white and cast long shadows across both Data and the equipment. At the heart of this light was an electric blue spot, slowly growing and, as Data watched, it slowly fell and settled on Paqarina's body where like a strange water-drop, it spread to cover her completely.

Suddenly there was nothing. The light faded, taking with it whatever had been the body of the Ensign, and leaving in its place a glowing, golden ball. This hovered for quite some time before settling once more on the blankets and assuming corporeal form. But this was not the Auey Data knew, nor was it the Ensign Paqarina. A complete stranger lay there, the height of a ten-year-old child.

She looked across at Data and said, "It is accomplished. Now I must remain among the lower ranks aboard your ship. You will have need of my powers before very long."

"But you will not be recognised."

"This body?" Her eyes sparkled. "This is temporary until I can form my accustomed one."

Data stood and left, but not before leaving a suitably-worded message for Beverly on her computer screen. *It's not really worth the time and effort to waken her*, he thought.

During his duty shift the Red Alert sounded, followed almost apologetically by the voice of Coatl. "Captain, I think you'd better get here very quickly."

Leaving Data in charge of the bridge, Picard, Riker and a Security team made their way to the guest quarters, to find the door open and the light-field inoperative. "What's happened here?"

"I don't know," said Coatl. "I woke

up to find this."

"And where are your... offspring now?"

"They could be anywhere. Some have begun to imitate living things but most are still on the inorganic stage. They'll be harder to find now. Your Chief Engineer has quite a talent for spotting them."

Picard made his way to the computer. "Can you tell me how long this door's been open?"

"Eight hours, thirty-six minutes, and five seconds."

"Cause?"

"Power surge in Sickbay. The light generator was affected by the electromagnetic fluctuation and one of the inhabitants succeeded in opening the door."

"No wonder the Alert sounded. They could be anywhere!"

Of more import was trying to make sure it didn't happen again. Riker checked the light-generator again and it seemed to be functioning, while Picard persuaded a team from Security to start combing the ship for the blobs. Three were found quickly, one disguised as a plant and two as stones, in the main Deck Eight corridor. Picard thought the others would be much more of a challenge.

It proved to be just that. Ten hours later, a complete search of all parts of the ship, and only those three caught. Where had the others got to? Geordi was working flat-out to try and cover all the ship; Data and Wesley were in Engineering trying to adapt a tricorder to pick up the blobs.

"We know that they are sensitive to green light, and that they show a ten-point star formation in ultraviolet light.."

"You forget there're a lot of places they might be hiding."

"That is true. But it is a start."

He called the bridge and suddenly, without warning the entire ship's lighting went off. The calm voice of Picard came drifting through communications. "This is the Captain. I want everyone to be on the lookout for any object which shows a ten-point star pattern. Inform Security immediately if you see one. These can be considered harmless but it is better that they are all in the same place."

Calls came in fairly rapidly. One was disguised as a flower in Ten Forward, where another had taken on the shape of an empty glass and was about to be recycled; one was in Engineering disguised as an ARI control chip - highly dangerous if not lethal. Two had been found in Sickbay among the medical instruments, along with another masquerading as a tricorder. Data found two in his quarters, one disguised as a piece of foam quadratium and the other as a spare circuit board.

Stores had about a dozen. Among the more unusual disguises there were a dilithium crystal, a phaser (which had apparently actually been fired) and a Klingon dagger. The chief blob found a very comfortable home on Holodeck Two, but was caught by Worf when he didn't change his form quickly enough.

With the exception of the latter, all the blobs were thrown back into the light-box. Coatl said that the chief blob was now too old to be contained, and had learned the art of disguise well. As if to back him up, the chief blob turned itself into an exact duplicate of Coatl. Now

there were three Commander Rikers aboard!

Picard suggested that it might be better if they found some way of making Coatl and his chief blob appear less like the crew, and thus Data was recalled from Engineering to take Coatl and the blob onto the holodeck and give them a choice of forms. It proved to be good practice for Data.

Meanwhile, Geordi and Wesley were trying out the modified tricorder. With the help of Data (or more specifically a couple of subprocessor circuits 'borrowed' from his arm) the tricorder sent out a beam of green light and tracked anything that moved in response to it. But they had fifteen of the blobs still to find.

They had not had much success when in Jefferies Tube N-17 the tricorder picked up a slight movement. On further inspection it proved to be a largish blob which had disguised itself as a duranium strut.

"Looks like we've an idea where they are now." Geordi was right. Thirteen turned up at various points in both the Jefferies tubes, service crawlways and turbolift shaft. That left two. "Where could they be?"

At the suggestion of Data the entire ship was combed again, but that, as Geordi had suspected, proved futile, even with the tricorder wired to the main sensor system. Then strange things began to happen.

The turbolift and main corridor doors opened without need or warning, or closed just as you were going through them; the food replicators produced very peculiar dishes; the engines surged to Warp Nine and dropped to half impulse just as quickly.

On the bridge, Picard was understandably worried. "What's going on?"

"It would appear that we have found the last two blobs sir."

"What do you mean?"

"I have just scanned the starboard computer core with green light. They are there, sir."

"Can you get them out?"

"That is a problem for Coatl, sir. He knows them far better than I do. Perhaps he can do it."

At that moment bridge lighting failed and Worf simultaneously reported, "Sensors not functioning sir."

An audible groan came from the framework of the Enterprise. "What was that?"

Data's hands flew across the console. "Structural integrity field dropping, sir. Suggest implementation of emergency procedures."

"Yellow alert, Number One. Ensign, bring us to full stop."

"Aye, sir," came from the ensign at the helm.

Even that caused more complaints from the structure, and automatically the alert changed to red, even though by this time the Enterprise was stationary. "Get Coatl here, at once."

"I heard that, Captain," said a voice. Two figures stood in the turbolift door; tall, distinguished Andorians, their blue skin and pale cream hair almost shining in the glittering console lights.

"Well, at least we'll know you now," said Picard.

"I chose this form as there are no others aboard your ship, and the rest of my offspring may also take it without being mistaken for your crew." Coatl inclined his head so he could pick up the computer sounds better with his antennae. "But it takes some getting used to."

"We need your help."

"I know. On my planet the usual recourse in a computer infestation was to kill them."

"How?"

"By whatever method you normally use. I have no worries about your doing it; get more than one of my people in a computer core and you can in effect say goodbye to that computer. We can spread ourselves so thinly as to cover every part, and of course will eventually take over the entire computer. Moreover, those we have removed alive have been affected by the electromagnetic inputs to the core and are far from sane. That is why among my people invading a computer core carries - carried - the death penalty."

"Mr Data, prepare to flood the starboard core with gamma radiation."

"Yes, sir." He did not like the idea. "Sir, could they be persuaded to leave?"

Coatl shook his head. "They are destructive now, greedy for control of your computer - and of you."

"All right, Data, I know it's against your programming."

"Yes, sir, but it is necessary to save the ship."

Neither Coatl nor Acatl, the chief blob, now adult, showed any emotion as the computer core was irradiated. It was, to them, a necessary and vital act to save the Enterprise.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE 43332.1 Having captured most of Coatl's rather prolific offspring and contained them within the light field until they are able to take a suitable form, we are now faced with the problem of what to do with them all. Another message has been sent to Starfleet and we are still awaiting the reply. Meanwhile the Qaywans, now disguised as Andorians, seem to be everywhere. They are harmless, if somewhat numerous, and have promised not to change form while they are aboard. Most of their names verge on the unpronounceable. Our astrophysics Ensign, Jach'a Mallku, has now passed through her regeneration cycle and is once more able to carry out her duties, though at the insistence of both Dr Crusher and Counselor Troi she has spent the past week sitting in on classes at the school, mainly to accustom her once more to Human behaviour although, so I am told, there is nothing remotely Human about the Ensign.

We are currently en route to Starbase 478, otherwise known as Chacaltaya, for computer core decontamination and routine maintenance, plus replacement of two of the structural integrity field generators which burned out during the computer failure. Chacaltaya is a reasonably hospitable place midway between a nebula and a star cluster - they

say the views are quite spectacular!

Picard switched the recorder off, turned to Riker and smiled.

"Starbase Chacaltaya? Hospitable?"

"It's the log, Number One. What personal recollections we may have about Chacaltaya are best left to ourselves."

"Last time I was there the crew beat me out of a week's wages."

"How?"

"Poker."

That made Picard smile, as Riker was undoubtedly the best poker player aboard the Enterprise.

Worf growled, "And that thing behind the bar has no sense of occasion."

"What do you mean?"

"What he means," said Data, "is that the bartender in the Chacaltaya lounge is both non-humanoid and has no etiquette at all. It is common belief that he - we think it male but are not sure - is half Excalbian and half Sheliak, with the level of tact which is not found in both races."

Deanna Troi laughed. "That's not all. Last time I saw the place, half of it was unserviceable due to meteorite impact."

"I'm sorry, everyone, but that's where we're going. It's the only repair facility in this sector - though from what you say it needs a good deal of repair itself."

He got no further as at that moment Worf said, "Message incoming from Starfleet Command, sir."

"On screen."

The friendly face of Admiral Catamarca came up on the screen. He was Organian and no doubt had been handed this one as a hot potato.

"Captain Picard, I have studied your report on the break-up of Iskay Qaywa with some interest, as indeed I have the progress reports on your guests. I think we have found the solution. There is a Class H planet in the Wat'a Hunt'ay system which we consider a suitable world for Coatl and his children. It is uninhabited, but pleasant. The only problem he may find is that the atmosphere is mainly methane but if as you say his race can thrive in a non-oxygen atmosphere then they may have it as their own."

The screen clicked off. "End of communication, sir."

"Number One?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Find Coatl and Acatl and get them to meet me in the Observation Lounge. Mr. Data, you have the bridge."

Coatl was relatively easy to find; he was drinking tea in Ten Forward. He was persuaded to join the others in the Observation Lounge to discuss Starfleet's suggestion.

"It sounds reasonable to me. Yes, we can breathe a methane atmosphere; in fact it was one of the reasons I became an engineer, precisely because I *could* breathe methane. How long will it take us to get there?"

"That's just the point, Coatl, I can't take you. The USS Candelaria is a survey

ship assigned to the Wat'a Hunt'ay sector and she has been diverted to Starbase Chacaltaya to collect you."

"How long before we reach the Starbase?"

"About a day."

That pleased Coatl no end.

Well, thought Data, the views might be spectacular but Starbase Chacaltaya most certainly is not. The mispronunciation "Charcoal Bucket" which he had heard among the crew now began to make sense; by no stretch of the imagination was it new. Built originally around what had been an obsolete space station of the K-7 type, it had had bits added here, bits added there, until it looked like something you could not have imagined even in the worst nightmares of the writers of science fiction on Earth in the nineteen-fifties. Around the centre were the docking bays, some intact, most not, due to flying debris both from the nebula and the star cluster, in addition to bits which had fallen off the station itself. How that space station stayed where it was was a mystery even to Starfleet. Every piece showed meteorite damage; some parts were off limits due to it. The broad upper part, resembling a flattened mushroom, showed cracks and holes; much of it was unserviceable.

Only in the smaller lower mushroom and the top pinnacle was there any illumination; the Commander knew only too well that as a Starbase Chacaltaya did not have much longer. He also knew (unlike many of his guests) that the Starbase was slowly tilting on its axis and would ultimately fall into the nebula. He hoped to be away long before then.

With a mixture of shock and relief the Enterprise succeeded in achieving geostationary orbit around Chacaltaya. There was no question of docking as, according to the Starbase Commander, "All our umbilical support facilities are up the spout." The shock was because it was even worse than Picard remembered it and the relief because he had spotted the Candelaria already there. After a short while he said that anyone who wanted shore leave could take it. There were not very many!

Among them, unusually, was Data. He volunteered to take Coatl and his offspring to the Candelaria and then asked permission to show Ensign Jach'a Mallku the "delights of the Space Station" as he put it. As Worf phrased it, slightly more accurately, "You mean the only delight of the Chacaltaya Station, the view."

The journey to the Candelaria by shuttlecraft was quick and relatively easy. Coatl's children had now well outgrown the blob stage and had taken on the form of Andorians; a problem, as most of the Candelaria's crew were Andorian. In typical style and with a grin, Coatl remedied the problem by taking the form of Riker once more. Data wondered what Picard would make of a planet whose sole sentient life forms were duplicates of his First Officer.

From the observation gallery in the pinnacle of Starbase Chacaltaya, the view of the starfield was wonderful. The Ensign looked at it, the many hues of the nebula reflecting from her dark skin, making it glow. "I've never seen anything quite like this before, Data," she said.

"There are other nebulae but this is the nearest we can get to one. It is quite beautiful."

After a while they travelled to the

main area of the Starbase. As they had suspected, there was not very much to do, the personnel and facilities being wound down, but they did descend on the bar for refreshment.

The bartender was indeed somewhere between a Sheliak and an Excalbian, nothing remotely resembling humanoid at all. In fact he had more in common with Coatl or the entity called Armus than he did with Data and Paqarina. But at least he spoke understandable Standard. "What can I get you?"

Paqarina spoke. "For my friend - no, Data, let me order this time - Arcturan teqte, and for me, Venidana winapu."

Data had never heard of teqte but the bartender (another of Paqarina's friends, called Coniraya) had, and produced a glass of viscous blue liquid which smelled reasonably pleasant. On tasting it Data discovered that it contained most of his usual nutriments and in fact appeared to lubricate his biofunctions slightly more effectively than his normal choice. Of Paqarina's winapu he did at least have some knowledge.

The serenity was shattered by an impact and alarm bells. Then the voice of the Commander. "All non-essential personnel please return to their own vessels immediately."

Data hit his communicator; before he could speak the voice of Picard came through. "What the devil's going on, Data?"

"There appears to be some kind of emergency, sir. Request permission to beam aboard the Enterprise."

He got no further, as in a shimmer of light both he and Paqarina vanished.

They materialised on the bridge, just as the Commander of Starbase Chacaltaya hailed the Enterprise.

"Can I offer help?" said Picard.

"I don't think your help will be any use, Jean-Luc, this rust bucket has had it."

"What is happening, sir?"

"Mr. Data, can you verify systems failure aboard Starbase 478?"

As soon as he was at Ops Data checked. "Yes, sir. There has been a breach of hull integrity and extensive damage in the area of the main computer core, leading to failure of both this and backup systems. Full systems failure in... fifteen minutes."

"Commander Amaru, have you an emergency vessel in which to leave?"

"Oh, that I did! The last one was destroyed by a stellar fragment about three months ago."

"The Candelaria?"

"Out of range, of our communications anyway."

"Then I'll take you. How many staff have you?"

"About thirty."

Beaming them aboard was easy, but finding somewhere for them to stay was a different matter. They took over the deck six guest quarters quite happily; the Excalbian hybrid invaded Ten Forward and tried to take over the bar. After being warned off by Guinan's famous artillery piece he thought co-operation far more advisable, and Guinan was pleased with the help - and the new drinks Coniraya managed to programme into the

replicators.

Fifteen minutes later the crew of Chacaltaya, in Ten Forward, as well as the Enterprise bridge crew, watching on the main viewer, looked on as one by one the lights of the now-distant Starbase were extinguished. Slowly it began to topple on its axis, the outer hull buckling as the structural integrity field failed, and the brilliant flash as the shielding on the matter/antimatter generators failed. Finally the glittering, spinning fragments, few scant survivors of what had been the most notorious Starbase of them all, were drawn into the nebula where they disappeared forever. It is doubtful whether many of them mourned its passing.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE 43340.2 Having rescued the crew of Starbase 478 and witnessed its destruction, we are now on course to rendezvous with the USS Achilles to transfer the Starbase crew. From there, our orders are to travel to the Ch'aska Nawi star system in order to investigate what appears to be a new type of radio star, possibly of a type which may explain the origins of our galaxy. Ensign Jach'a Mallku is very excited, as she has made the study of these stars - along with building light field generators and the theory of intercontinual travel - very much her speciality. Also Ensign Paqarina Jach'a Mallku is awarded a commendation for her services in rounding up the Qaywans.

He switched the recorder off. "Mr. Crusher, set course 275 mark 40."

"Aye, sir. Laid in."

"Engage."

Leaving the shimmering fragments of what had been Chacaltaya, the Enterprise turned and sped away at Warp Six.

It took quite some time to reach the Ch'aska Nawi system, changes of orders and redirections - plus an encounter with Q - notwithstanding. Picard was resting after the most recent events.

Paqarina had been conspicuous by her absence, and even Data was not so sure where she was. She seemed to be saving her energy rather noticeably. This was, of course, before the fight in Ten Forward.

Paqarina was known to detest violence, and when, one night, a Tellarite crewmember much the worse for Saurian brandy strode up to her and demanded that she explain why she had not completed a set task, tension mounted. Tellarites, as Sarek of Vulcan had once observed, need no excuse for an argument.

The Ensign rose slowly, glaring at the Tellarite. He took it as an insult and threw a glass of brandy at her. Before long a full-scale fight had developed between them; Security was called and even Guinan found her presence useless.

A voice cut through the melee but only two present understood the words. "Auey! Mana wanurqachiskan! Kunan ripukusqayki! Phaway, wayra-hina, kaypachamanta!" It was the voice of Guinan, speaking pure Venidana, directed to Paqarina.

Throwing the Tellarite off her, Paqarina made for the door. Too late. A bolt from a hand phaser caught her; though set on stun, it flung her into the doors where she lay still, her back broken.

"Medical emergency, Ten Forward."

By the time Beverly got there it was too late. A broken back meant death for a Venidana (though there had been one exception; Auey's chaski Chetia) and so, to most of the Enterprise crew, the episode of Ensign Jach'a Mallku was over.

She had left instructions in her cabin that most of her effects were to be destroyed, with the exception of the contents of a small wooden box and a curious hollow globe, both of which were to be given to Data.

He received them in silence. The box contained the jewels of the Venidana kallawayaya, Auey's jewels, and even as he watched, the globe began to glow gently, a golden-yellow light.

When he was off duty the following night, Data was aware that he was not alone. He had called up Paqarina's service record from the computer and noted that it had not been closed. As he made to alter it the following appeared on the screen.

Data. Do not close this log as it is not yet complete. I have one final task before then. For that I will need your help. Auey.

Data did not know what to make of that.

Riker was not very pleased. He was currently conducting the survey of the hitherto unexplored area of the Ch'aska Nawi star system in order that it could be mapped for future reference. Things were going slowly - in fact he had the feeling that a tired snail could do them faster.

"Commander?" came a growl behind him.

"Yes, Worf, what is it?"

"We are encountering radio emissions from a source directly ahead."

"Data, what do you make of them?"

After some playing with the console - though 'playing' to Data was the equivalent of a week's hard work for any normal Human being - Data said, "Inconclusive, sir. Although the emissions appear to be electromagnetic, they are of a type never before encountered."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, sir. Neither I nor the computer have any record of anything like them."

"Worf?" He hoped the Tactical Officer could shed some light on the situation.

"No identifiable pattern, sir."

"Intelligent?"

"Inconclusive, sir," came Data's level voice.

Riker tapped his communicator. "Bridge to Captain."

It was just his luck that Captain Picard was in the holodeck at that moment, in his favourite scenario as the 1930's San Francisco detective Dixon Hill. A quick call of "Exit" got him into the corridor from where he answered via the com panel. "Yes, Number One?"

"We've picked up that unknown radio source, sir."

"How do you mean, unknown?"

"The one Starfleet Command told us to look out for. We don't know what it is or whether it's hostile or not."

"On my way."

He made a detour to his quarters to change out of the clothes he was wearing, but he still arrived at the turbolift with his boots in one hand and a cup of Earl Grey in the other. That was when the yellow alert was initiated.

Why was the turbolift so slow? It seemed to take half a century to reach the bridge. Picard stepped out, cup of tea still untouched, and his eyes were drawn by the glowing turquoise, almost electric blue, object on the main viewing screen.

"What is it, Mr Worf?"

"It would appear to be the source of the radio emissions, sir."

Riker wondered what it was doing there. He asked Troi if she thought it was intelligent, and after a pause she said, "I can't feel anything at all. Either there is nothing or it can screen its thoughts."

Data warned that it was approaching fast. Picard ordered the raising of deflector shields. "Whatever it is, it knows we're here."

Then the object vanished, to appear just as suddenly above Data's shoulder; it was now a glowing ball about eighteen inches in diameter. Worf drew his phaser to fire but could not hit the object without also hitting the Second Officer. From there the object floated across the bridge to rest by the end of the horseshoe and Troi's seat.

"Analysis - *anyone!*" Picard needed to say nothing more, for at that moment the

glow brightened, then in a malicious parody of a transporter beam-in, became Q.

Picard looked straight at him.

"I might have known it was you," said Riker.

"That's a nice welcome, I must say. Worf, I think I'm warm enough without the assistance of your phaser, thank you."

Picard asked him what he wanted.

"I merely wanted to spend a little more time aboard your tiny starship. A pleasant change from the Continuum."

As Data pointed out, Q had only just returned to the Continuum after being thrown out. During this escapade Auey had been noticeably absent, but Data wondered exactly what she had been up to. But that was irrelevant now anyway. Auey was dead, killed in a fight, and all he had were her jewels and one of her feathers. To Q he said, "That you are here makes me feel no better."

Q turned on him. "You're an android, you can't feel anything."

Data, with the faintest trace of a smile - and sudden intuition - said, "I can, however, make your stay here a good deal less enjoyable."

Picard was surprised, more so when Riker signalled to him. Data brought a golden-brown feather from his sleeve.

"What is that?"

"If you recall, sir," said the calm Second Officer, "our other friend from the Q Continuum, Auey, promised to help us if we had any need of her. I believe she meant if Q bothered us again."

Q looked scornful. "And who is this Auey?"

"Known also as Qoriquoyllur," said Picard.

Had Data been looking he would have caught the flash of fear in Q's face. At that moment, however, the android was busily trying to thread the feather behind his communicator pin and did not hear Q snap his fingers.

Everyone else did, as Data froze, his circuits completely inactive. To all intents and purposes Data was dead. Picard, at once understandably astonished and horrified, said, "What have you done?"

"Merely prevented your android from making a fool of himself," said Q confidently. "Where the exile - " he said the next word scornfully - "Qoriquoyllur is, nobody, not even my fellows in the Continuum, can guess."

Picard asked what he meant.

"I mean that since Qoriquoyllur left the Continuum, we have neither had nor desired any contact with her."

A voice said, "That is not true, Q," and Q visibly jumped.

"What do you mean?"

The voice, deep, commanding and yet, according to Troi benevolent, said, "We have kept track of the exile Qoriquoyllur through all her travels. She has given her time and her power to benefit others, unlike you. She took the form of a Venidana, a creature of this universe, and brought other life from her body. When they no longer needed her assistance she left them to continue her journeys undoing the damage others of the Continuum had done."

"That was her decision."

"As it was her decision to leave the Continuum. We would welcome her back but she will not return. I would not tangle with her if I were you."

Q laughed. "Even my colleagues taunt me."

Riker crossed the bridge to the motionless Data. "If I recall there was a very simple way to call Auey," he said. "Or, rather, for Data to call Auey."

"Can you remember it?"

"I think so, sir."

"Make it so, Number One."

Q expressed his doubts openly as Riker finished threading the feather and then tapped Data's communicator pin.

"Oh, how easily led you Humans are!"

"Is that you, Q'oronta?" It was clearly Auey's voice. Q turned chalk-white.

"What's the matter, Q?" said Riker. "Do I take this to mean you're actually frightened?"

"It would appear so, sir." It was Data's voice, but the android was still motionless at his post. Slowly, he vanished.

Picard said, "So the power of the omnipotent Q has now, it seems, met its match," though he wondered where Data was.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE
43550.1. While mapping the

Ch'aska Nawi system we have been invaded by our old nemesis Q, who has now begun yet again to make a nuisance of himself aboard the Enterprise. However, help would appear to be at hand. The Second Officer, Commander Data, has been spirited away either by Q or by another of the Continuum, and his whereabouts are currently unknown.

They were known to all those in Ten Forward. At one of the tables nearest to the window, a very shaken Data was speaking to a young Ship's Services Ensign; dark-haired, dark-skinned, (though it seemed to glow under the lights) with sparkling blue eyes. She appeared to have gained the friendship and confidence of the android.

Guinan brought them drinks; Data his usual semi-organic nutriment suspension in a silicon-based liquid medium, or as the Ensign called it, 'oil', and the Ensign a strange dark drink called xocolatl, native to the distant and until recently unexplored planet of Tierra Venida.

As she set the tray down, Guinan said, "Hello, I haven't seen you here before."

The Ensign lifted her head. Her skin was not black, as Guinan had thought, but rather a coppery colour. Chestnut brown hair streamed down her back almost to the floor, and those eyes sparkled like sapphires as she said, "Mana, I'm not a regular crew member - now." The voice carried an accent.

Guinan smiled. "That I know. Where are you from?"

"You tell me."

"I wouldn't like to guess. You

sound like a Venidana but you don't look like one."

Data spoke. "Auey here was in my quarters a short while ago, when I awoke after Q had deactivated me. My first view was of her tending my potted plant."

"And you didn't mind a stranger in your quarters?" Guinan was amazed. Data had always been withdrawn and somewhat private when off duty, but his obvious attachment to the Ensign was unexpected. The Ensign reached to touch him, instinctively with her left hand.

Data, his golden eyes almost glowing, said, "Auey and I share many things. She has shared my thoughts and I hers."

"Living in an android's circuits is something I found very interesting," said Auey with a smile.

"Well, you've certainly had an effect on him. But what's going on?"

Data looked at Auey. Almost imperceptibly she nodded. "Auey here is one of the Q."

Guinan froze. She had thought the episode ended with the fight with the Tellarite. Her people detested the Q and were equally the only ones the Continuum feared. "I might have guessed. So what games are you going to play on us this time?" Her promise to Auey was holding so far.

"I play no games." The Ensign looked astonished, even hurt.

"You're a Q. There's nothing you won't sink to..." A thought came into her head. "Unless your name happens to be Qoriquyllur, which I doubt because I last heard of her near Tierra Venida."

Data felt Auey's control relax a little as she shook her head gently. In that movement she became a Venidana, her legs almost fused and covered with fine white feathers, which also formed a pile at her feet, and four golden-brown wings, the feathers the same colour as that which Data wore. She kept the top half of the Starfleet uniform, however, carefully modified to suit her unusual anatomy.

"Looking like this, perhaps?"

Guinan smiled, and Data asked her why. "Nothing. Just keep an eye on Auey. My people have reason to thank her; more than once she's driven the other Q away. I think all the compassion that Continuum has is in this one place." She remembered something. "And if my memory is correct you're not impartial to Venidana winapu."

As Guinan left to get some from the replicator, Data said, "But I thought the Q had no need of nourishment."

"Technically we don't, but I, like you, enjoy it socially for its own sake. It must be as a consequence of my living as a Venidana for so long. Living as a creature of flesh and bone has that effect, I'm afraid. You have seen my true form, and when I am in material form, it is hidden. But then I must behave as the entity whose form I take."

She looked out of the window at the starfield passing by. Many years ago it had been her playground, to do with as she wished when she was a young, impressionable Q. She still was young, but had turned her back on the Q's philosophy that timelines were theirs to manipulate at random and had denied herself both the Continuum and to a great extent her power, to become a more lowly lifeform and experience through its eyes the wonder of such things as flowers, the song of birds, all manner of

things which her fellow Q did not understand and never could, in their omnipotence and immortality.

Auey too was, as she put it, "almost immortal", as she had promised one day to return to the Continuum. In fact she had no intention of doing so; that to her would be death. Her contingency plans were made now - she had the bolthole she wanted. Throughout her time on Tierra Venida there had been attempts to kill her, none of which had succeeded. And now, in desperation, the Continuum had set her a task, the reward for which would be her freedom from them forever, the cost of failure her life. It was too difficult for any of the others to attempt, and besides the subject of the task was familiar to them. For they had asked Auey to humiliate and ultimately capture Q.

A voice beside her made her turn. Picard stood there. Quickly she turned herself back into an ensign so as not to look too out-of-place.

"What have you two been up to?" Picard smiled. "I take it you abducted my Second Officer?"

"Ari. Had he stayed there Q would have destroyed him."

"And he's too valuable a member of my bridge crew for that."

There was a flash of light and Q stood beside Auey, apparently oblivious of her presence or identity. "Hello, Jean-Luc, any sign of that Venidana as yet?"

Picard began to speak but Data hushed him. "Oh, and I see my android friend has a girl friend. What do you see in him? He's only a machine!"

Auey spoke, her voice level. "I see more than you do."

"All the universe and she chooses you." He picked up Auey's winapu and quickly drank it. "At least she has an appreciation of fine spirits. You only analyse them."

That gave Auey an idea. Without breaking her cover she said, "How about a drinking contest, Q?" Q laughed as Auey continued, "The omnipotent Q turns down a challenge? I can certainly out-drink you."

Q laughed again. The mere thought of being beaten in such a contest by a woman was preposterous. Those crewmembers nearby thought it worth running a book on. Bets were fairly high against Q by those (very few) in the know, and against Auey by the majority. Data thought it fair - much to Q's annoyance - and even bet two thousand credits on Auey's winning.

Picard was chosen to referee the contest, much to his chagrin.

That evening Ten Forward was packed, and those who were on duty had pictures of the contest piped to their work stations. Geordi and Riker had also bet heavily on Auey, Worf not so heavily. The news had spread through the ship like wildfire.

Picard stood by the bar, uneasy. Q was waiting patiently. Without a referee, Picard knew, Q would bend the rules so far you could tie a knot in them. Troi had told him that Q was frightened of Auey, even though he did not as yet know her identity. Auey, Troi believed, was perfectly capable of annihilating him.

Riker, Beverly and Data were all sitting at a nearby table, waiting calmly as Auey strode confidently into Ten Forward and took her place next to

Picard.

"What kept you?" asked Q.

"I had some preparations to make."

"Like your will?"

Riker told him to calm down, to which Q said, "You should know that I'll win."

Picard set out the rules which were simple. Guinan would choose the drinks so there was no favouritism - in fact she chose winapu and followed it with the nearly-lethal aya waskha of Tierra Venida. The last one still standing was to be declared winner. After a few drinks Auey said, "You accepted the challenge, Q'oronta."

"What's that she called you?" asked Riker.

"It's a very insulting word in the Venidana language, 'corncob'. It means I'm useless, finished, spent."

Auey was still smiling.

At the third measure of aya waskha, Q choked. "What is this stuff? Are you trying to poison me?"

No-one interrupted Data as he said, "The effects of aya waskha on the metabolism of a Q have yet to be tested."

Q looked horrified.

CAPTAIN'S LOG, SUPPLEMENTAL. For the past three hours we have been entertained in Ten Forward by a highly unusual and unorthodox drinking contest which, although against my better judgement as Captain of the

Enterprise, is taking place between two of the Q. They have so far exhausted every kind of alcoholic drink in the known universe and are now, with the help of the synthesizer, inventing their own, each one more lethal than the last. As referee I am finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish which, if either, is more sober. Fortunately, neither has lost control of their considerable powers... as yet.

Riker had taken his post on the bridge by now, and was understandably worried as to how the Captain was getting on. He thought it about time he called up Ten Forward. The prompting from Worf, who had sixty credits on Auey's winning, was unnecessary.

"Bridge to Captain."

Picard took his eyes off Q and the steaming glass of liquid dilithium momentarily to reply, "Go ahead, Number One."

"I was wondering how our two... friends were progressing."

"Not too badly," began Picard, but was cut short as with a loud groan Q collapsed at his feet. "Correction, Number One. Auey's just won. I hope you had a substantial bet on her."

"Did you?"

Picard grinned. He would have to find Chief O'Brien and collect his winnings. "I think our Transporter Chief will have to pay out quite a chunk of his earnings."

Riker laughed. "What are you going to do now?"

For once the Enterprise Captain did not know. Auey, still calm despite having consumed enough alcohol, benzine, liquid dilithium and other poisonous substances to kill the entire crew of the Starship, if indeed not all of Starfleet, spoke.

"Data, my friend, I will need your help."

That snapped Picard into action. "To do what?"

Auey requested that she be allowed to take Q to Holodeck 4 and lock him in.

"You can't do that!"

"I think she can, sir," said Data. "Permission to assist?" he said as he stood and made his way towards the now unconscious Q.

"Granted. Did you get that, Number One?"

Riker said he did, as Data picked Q up and he and Auey left in the general direction of the turbolift.

"I want the corridors around Holodeck 4 sealed off as soon as Auey and Data have left them."

"Yes sir. Riker out."

Picard ordered a cup of Earl Grey with some relief. Guinan said she had been getting worried. On being pressed further she said that one of the two competitors, by inference Q, did not know Auey's strength, and was in for a rude awakening.

Geordi smiled. He hated Q as much as Guinan did, if only because he tended to make systems go wrong all the time. He also hadn't forgiven Q for the trouble the Calamarain caused to the Enterprise's

systems - or his clumsy attempt to take over Engineering.

"They make a good couple, don't they?" said Guinan, and Picard just looked at her.

"Who do?"

"Auey and Data. They've been the talk of Ten Forward. Haven't you seen the way his eyes sparkle when he's with her?"

"Be serious, Guinan. Data's an android, he has no feelings."

"Oh, I don't know. He certainly showed something I would call affection for Tasha Yar; he was devastated when she was killed. Who's to say Auey hasn't reached a depth even he doesn't know he has?"

"An android and a Q, neither Human, yet we're endowing them with a Human characteristic," said Picard. "I wish Troi were here, she'd find it fascinating."

Q was a dead weight on Data's back and, despite his strength, he felt his joints protesting at having to carry such a load. When they reached the entrance to Holodeck 4 it was not without some relief that he dropped Q to the floor.

"You can programme anything?"

"Anything desired or imagined."

"And it can be changed during its course?"

"Yes, by voice command."

Auey sighed. "No use. You're the only person I know who might be able to

initiate the programme I want." Data felt something akin to embarrassment until Auey said, "At least you're the only one fast enough. I want a programme which can be changed according to the thoughts of the person inside. Inversely."

"If he feels his surroundings are pleasant, to make them unpleasant? I do not understand."

"Q has never faced up to the unpleasant, except for that short spell when Qhopakhawana and the others threw him out of the Continuum and stripped him of his powers, and so in order to make his current surroundings pleasant he must think of things he does not like."

"I see, I think. And his powers?"

"They can be countered by the computer if the correct patterns are input."

"Accessing the computer by sound is simple but accessing thought patterns is not." He began to work carefully on the panel. Auey suggested that he confine computer access to the transmission frequency she had used to contact the Enterprise when they had first met, as it was one she knew the other Q used. She also requested isolation of the holodeck from all non-essential ship's systems in case Q let his fury go at anything. As a final touch she had Data override the critical injury cutout - so that Q was in real danger. After more programming Data said, "Ah, I think I have it."

The computer said, "Programme complete, enter when ready."

Auey told Data just to throw Q in and leave him there.

"Is he all right?"

"He will be."

The holodeck door closed with a muffled clang and they made their way back down the corridor, the Venidana with an occasional flick of her wings and the android with easy strides. Auey had taken her form as a Venidana while they had been programming the holodeck, as she now had no need to hide her identity.

There was still some time remaining before Data was due on duty, and he and Auey retreated to his quarters. They had not been there long, involved in one of their favourite discussion topics, the prospects and theory of bridging continua when there was a sound at the door.

"Come in," said Data and Wesley Crusher came in. He was still looking forward to entering Starfleet Academy and Data had every confidence that he'd do very well.

"Data, I - " He stopped short. "Sorry, I didn't know you had company."

Auey stood. "Wesley Crusher, I believe. I'm Auey."

She shook hands with him; Wesley then reached to touch Auey's folded wings in the Venidana greeting, which made her smile.

As Wesley sat down he said, "You're a Q?"

"Ari. This is not the form the Q take, but rather one that I have chosen. I will leave, if you wish."

Data put out a hand to make her stay. "I would appreciate your assistance with my lessons," he said.

The Acting Ensign looked from one to the other. "Data, what are you doing? This was supposed to be a lesson in

astrophysics."

"Well, I do not know what else the principle of migration between continua would be classed as."

"What?"

"The theory of migration between continua."

"Data, that's all hypothesis, it can't be done."

"It can and it is," said Auey. "When you go into warp drive, do you not cross the boundary into another continuum, where travel below light speed is impossible?"

"I suppose so, but it's only a localised effect."

"And do you not use the continuum of subspace for many of your transmissions?"

"Yes." Wesley was beginning to understand. "But there are others."

"The Q live in one - " began Auey.

"So he says. But what theirs is I don't know."

"I do," said Auey and Wesley looked at her again. "To the Q, the whole of your known universe is smaller than this starship, and its peoples comparatively smaller. They can observe and experiment on you even as you used to on microscopic creatures, and they have about as much respect for you as you have for a virus. Or at least most of them do. Some Q treat the rest of us like that as well."

Wesley asked Auey more about the continuum, and she spent the next hour, aided and abetted by Data, explaining it

to him. A friendly Q who had travelled through the universe and played with galaxies was a rare creature indeed.

They still had not finished when a slightly worried Beverly called Data's quarters. "Is Wesley there?"

"He is on his way," said Data as Wesley dashed for the door, late for his spell on the bridge. It was also Data's shift, so reluctantly he left Auey curled up on his couch, the only place where she could comfortably sleep.

Halfway down the corridor the yellow alert was signalled, and Data speeded his steps to the turbolift. Picard gave him a strange glance as he took his post.

The reason for the alert was clear. The sensors had picked up an unidentified ship approaching, bearing 340.54 mark 53.

"Analysis, Mr Data?"

"Working, sir." His hands flew across the console. "It appears to be an Orion trading vessel, sir."

The ship was now on screen, drifting and obviously powerless.

"What's an Orion ship doing here?"

"It would appear to be in trouble, Captain. They are on impulse power, and the engines are providing minimal life support."

"Call them, Worf."

The Klingon did so. "Hailing frequencies open, sir."

"On screen."

There was no response from the

video receiver. "I'm sorry, sir, the reply is audio only."

Picard thought that typical. "Orion ship, this is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Federation Starship Enterprise. Can we assist you?"

There was a crackling of static through which, after much filtering by both Worf and Data, the unusually quiet voice of the Orion captain could be heard.

"Enterprise? No, we can do without you. If you have any sense you will get as far away from this sector as you can."

"Can you tell me why?"

"Systems failed three days ago. The last thing to go was engineering. All computer control has gone and we have to control what's left manually."

"Any idea of the causes?"

The static increased, and through it only snatches of the Orion Captain could be heard. "Unknown... passed through a gas cloud... things went wrong after that."

"Signal fading, sir," said Worf.

"Stand by. I'm going to beam you and your crew aboard the Enterprise."

The Orion Captain said, "Into Federation detention? No thank you, Captain. I would rather take my chances here."

The static increased again and this time Data lost the signal. He was still trying to get it back when, with a flash of platinum flame, the Orion ship exploded.

Stunned silence across the bridge. Picard said, "Cause, Mr Data?"

"It would appear to be a complete

and simultaneous failure of all remaining systems, sir. The ship first buckled due to loss of internal atmosphere and structural integrity field failure, followed almost immediately by breakdown of antimatter shielding. Implosion followed by explosion, sir."

Riker smiled at Data's choice of words. "Anything else?"

Data checked. "No, sir. Just that."

"Then whatever caused it is still out there."

"It would appear so, sir."

Picard wondered what and where it was.

Q woke up on a sandy beach. It stretched to the horizon and the sun was shining. In the distance the sea was gently lapping the shore.

"This is pleasant. At least they chose to abandon me on a comfortable planet."

As he said this, from nowhere a tree fell, pinning his legs so he could not move. The tide began racing in and Q felt trapped. He snapped his fingers... and nothing happened.

The water had almost reached him. He snapped his fingers again but that only made the waves come faster. Soon he was surrounded by vile-tasting sea water, and apparently trapped.

Then just as quickly he found himself in a clearing in a forest, one of the most popular holodeck programmes. As he walked through the trees, his clothes snagged on a bramble.

He turned, but no matter where he looked brambles blocked his path. And on top of that, some vile bird had just relieved itself on his shoulder. How could he get out of this?

Auey was asleep when Data reached his quarters. She had curled up into a ball of feathers on his couch, her wings half-spread and her long hair trailing to the floor.

He picked up a lock of it, meaning to put it back along her body, but without thinking gently stroked the Venidana's head. He had seen many women aboard the Enterprise who were considered beautiful, but only Auey seemed to radiate it from within.

She stirred slightly, and that moment of calm serenity was lost as her sapphire eyes sparkled. And in that moment of understanding, compassion and knowledge, Data forgot that he was simply a machine. Captivated by the Venidana, he accompanied her to the other room, where he shared once again the wonder he had last known in the company of Tasha Yar.

Some considerable time later, he was sitting at the computer, updating his information concerning both Venidana and Q, when the door sounded and Picard and Riker came in.

"Is this a social visit, sir?"

"Well, yes and no. I came to see Auey."

"She is sleeping, sir. On my couch. Shall I wake her?"

"No, we'll wait." Picard went

through to sit on the comfortable armchair, and Riker pulled up another. Between them, her long hair ruffled, lay Auey, her head pulled deeply into her plumage and her wings spread over her. The long feathers which had been such a nuisance were neatly folded over her body, affording further insulation. Almost as if sensing their presence, which she probably had, she awoke and slowly, gracefully, sat up, spreading her wings forward so the feathers remained undamaged. The long feathers fell in a pile at her feet. Riker saw a faint line where her feathers did not match along the front of her legs. Were they fused? What had she said - no, it was Qori who had spoken - about the Qollanas? "They had their ankles broken as a punishment." Not their knees and ankles. So Auey's weren't fused after all. He looked again at the Venidana, then at Data, and though the words were there, he dare not voice them.

He glanced at Picard and saw that he too had come to the same conclusion. The smile said it all.

"Hello, Captain," said Auey, "What can I do for you?"

"I need your help."

"As me?"

"No," said Riker, "as a Q."

"If I can. What's the problem?"

"An Orion ship exploded near here a short while ago. Something about a gas cloud."

"That was the Phuyuruna, an ally of mine but a deadly enemy of the Q Continuum. This one has one thing in mind."

"What's that?"

"To get itself around my friend in the holodeck. To that end it is on its way to the Enterprise at considerable speed."

Picard straightened his uniform. "Is there any race in this part of the Galaxy he's not made an enemy of?"

"Very few, both in this galaxy and in others. You have met some of them, I believe."

"The Calamarain?" suggested Riker.

"The Calamarain are gentle compared to the Phuyuruna. My dilemma is, do I give him Q on a plate or show compassion for him?"

"And risk the Enterprise?"

Auey looked towards the door. His clothing in shreds, dripping with water, and spattered with mud and bird droppings, Q appeared.

"All right Auey, what's the meaning of this?" Q was angry. He took a step forward and hit an invisible barrier. "And what have you done to me?"

"Merely put you in a force field until I decide what to do with you."

Q asked what that was, and blanched when Auey mentioned the Phuyuruna.

"I don't think," said Auey calmly, "that Coatl and his people took very kindly to your sending their sun nova and destroying their planet. In fact I've heard that they want to throw you into the middle of the Mutara nebula and leave you there. Or play Parrisses Squares with you."

"It sounds like they like you less than we do," said Picard with a grin.

"Did I hear you say Coatl?" said Phuyuruna.
Riker.

"Ari."

"As in Coatl the Qaywan who we had the pleasure of knowing not so long ago?"

"Ari. When he left you Q began looking for trouble. He saw the Qaywans and their planet and thought it would be a good idea to send their sun nova. He forgot one thing."

"The Qaywans' ability to adapt their form to suit the conditions."

"Exactly. Now, although they're scattered all over the galaxy, they have evolved quite quickly into gas cloud creatures, the next step from where they were when you last saw them. Q is top of their wanted list."

"That's the last of my worries," said Q and snapped his fingers. He vanished, to reappear a few feet to the right of where he had been.

"There, got out of your little trap."

"Have you, Q?"

He tried to move but the force field had moved with him. He responded by threatening the Venidana, who simply smiled.

Riker told him to calm down. "I think she's got you, Q."

From her collar, Auey took the glittering dilithium crystal and held it towards Q. He vanished with a snap of his fingers, which made Auey laugh.

"Where's he gone? asked Picard.

"I diverted him and fed him to the

"That's inhuman," said Riker.

"I, as you can see, am not Human. I'm a Q."

That made Picard smile.

Data brought them drinks; xocolatl for Auey, coffee for Riker and the inevitable Earl Grey for the captain. As he squashed next to Auey on the couch he said, "Captain, Auey would make a valuable addition to the crew of the Enterprise."

"So she might, Data, but you know we can't collect every Q, Dick or Harry we come across."

"No matter what you think of her," said Riker and Picard smiled. There had been a subtle change in the android since Auey's return to the starship; he was more approachable and, if it could be said, more Human than usual.

That made Auey smile. "I suggest you check Starfleet records," she said.

"What?"

Data called up the computer, using Auey's full name; Qoriquoyllur Yachay Paqarina Jach'a Malliku.

"Jach'a Mallku, Qoriquoyllur Y.P., current rank ensign, assignment USS Enterprise, astrophysical research officer. Commendation for assistance in capture of Qaywans during a shipboard alert. Developer of copper/tumbaga lightfield coils and originator of theory of intercontinual travel."

Picard looked straight at Auey. "Have you been messing with Starfleet records?"

"Mana. I knew you would not allow me to stay on board your ship, with good reason, and so I put myself through Starfleet Academy some years ago - anything's possible for a Q - and got myself posted here."

"You should have reported with the new posting."

"Imarayku?"

Data spoke. "We collected her from the Lexington sir. Only four of the crew knew who she was, and she had all of them promise to keep it secret."

"Four of my crew?"

"Let me guess," said Riker. "Counselor Troi because Auey can't hide that telepathic power easily, Beverly Crusher because of her strange physiology - equally hard to hide - Guinan who can sense when there's a Q around, and the fourth must be you, Data."

"You are correct sir."

"I remember a young ensign with incredible potential. But wasn't she killed in a brawl in Ten Forward?"

"Mana," said Auey. "I had to do that in order to tempt Q back. When he was last aboard he couldn't sense me, but now he can. And when you summoned me I had to break my cover. That is understandable."

Data seemed pleased with the explanation. Picard asked him to give Auey a proper tour of the ship, and as they left Riker said, "They really are a good match."

"I wouldn't know, Will. Auey's a Q and from what we know of the

Continuum, dangerous."

Some time later, Data was showing Auey around the bridge. Apart from the length of her hair, now swept up into what the Venidana called a "chaski's tassel" so it was not quite so long, she looked like any other raw ensign; those bridge officers who had never seen her paid her no attention.

"As you can see we have two Science Stations here."

"Why two?"

"Partly to cross-check, or so that two officers can work on different projects simultaneously, and partly as backup in case one fails."

"Yachani, rikuni. And your library stores information on what?"

"Everything we know. Races, planets, anything we may encounter."

"And anything you haven't got in that massive brain of yours."

Data smiled. "Computer," he said, "access information on an entity called Auey."

"Working."

The lines flashed up on the screen:

AUEY, ALSO KNOWN AS QORIQOYLLUR, A MEMBER OF THE Q CONTINUUM MOST RECENTLY SEEN ON TIERRA VENIDA, IN THE GUISE OF A KALLAWAYA OR SORCERER. HER POWER PARAMETERS ARE AS YET UNKNOWN. EXILED FROM THE Q CONTINUUM BY HER OWN CHOICE, SHE HAS

USED HER POWERS TO UNDO THE DAMAGE CAUSED BY HER FELLOWS. TO THIS END SHE WILL NOT SHOW HER POWER UNLESS SHE IS FORCED TO DO SO. SHE IS CONSIDERED A GOD BY THE VENIDANA AMONG WHOM HER MANY CHILDREN LIVE.

"Not bad."

Data continued along the back wall, "Here are the Ops station, Environment and Engineering." He stood by Worf. "And these are our Tactical and Communications stations."

Auey grinned and looked into Worf's dark eyes. "A warrior after my own heart."

"I wouldn't say that..." Worf was astonished.

"You fight where and when you can. The Q know I am a warrior, and the Venidana have seen me drive foreigners out single-handed."

Data said, "Inquiry. If you can do that, why did you need the help of the Enterprise?"

"You will soon know, my wayqe."

An alarm sounded. Worf, after checking and adjusting a few panels, said, "Intruder alert. Deck 36 but approaching fast."

"Of what sort?" Picard's voice.

"Sensor readings vague."

Data ran to his post at Ops, evicting the ensign who currently occupied it out of his way, and began searching for any clue as to what the intruder was. "I do not know, Captain."

Troi spoke, "I do. Or at least I know it's intelligent, angry and searching for something."

With a flash Q stood there. "Qoriquoyllur, I escaped the trap you set for me, as you can see."

Auey blanched. Her skin lost its glow as she whispered, "And the Phuyuruna? What about him?"

"I've dealt with him."

Something not dissimilar to fine smoke began to drift across the bridge, emanating not from doors or other similar apertures, but through the very fabric of the Enterprise.

"How did it get here?" said Picard.

No-one had time to answer as at that moment Geordi came dashing through the turbolift door. "Oh, it's already here."

"Lieutenant La Forge? What's the matter?"

"I can't believe that thing! It went through solid duranium!"

"I thought that was impossible."

Data spoke. "It should be. But this creature can find its way through almost anything, including... neutronium, tritanium and duranium. Apparently it breaks itself down to pure energy, flows through the structure and then reconstitutes itself."

"A creature with a built-in transporter?" said Riker.

"I believe I just said that." It was the complaint of all Enterprise Science Officers.

Picard asked Geordi if he could see anything the others could not. "Sorry Captain. Just swirling patterns of polarised light. It's intelligent, there's definitely a pattern to them."

Picard wondered what it was doing there and Auey said that it was probably her fault. Q laughed.

"Why?" asked Riker.

"Having been outsmarted by Q'oronta it's now after me. I think we'll have to continue this conversation at a later date."

Riker asked what she was going to do.

"Get out of here and take it with me."

Before Data could stop her, Auey took on her form of a Venidana, folded her wings about her, and vanished. Her voice came through the ship's communications. "This is the safest thing, I think."

Picard asked Troi where the Venidana had gone.

"I do not know."

"She's run away," said Q, "like I knew she would. Her powers are nothing, she's been fooling you."

The Phuyuruna began to solidify a little, a grey-brown cloud of gas and energy, to one side of the bridge. It was evident that he had no fear of Q at all.

Picard was beginning to relax when Data said, "Computer malfunction sir."

"What?"

"There is a major malfunction of the

main computer... rerouting... That does not seem to be working."

Messages began flooding the bridge.

"Engineering, losing automatic control of the warp reaction chamber."

"Tactical, main phasers and photon torpedoes inoperative."

"Navigation not responding."

"Life support failure decks six and ten."

Riker said, "Data, surely you can do something."

"No, sir. All controls have switched to manual."

"As on the Orion ship," said Picard. "Analysis, Data."

"It would appear that the passage of the Phuyuruna through them has caused the ship's systems to go to overload."

"Can you repair them?"

Geordi spoke. "With Data's help I think so, sir, but it'll take some time."

Picard dismissed them both to Life Support to begin sorting out the overloaded circuitry. At that moment Q said, "Well, Jean-Luc, it was nice knowing you," and snapped his fingers.

Nothing happened.

Q tried again. This time the Phuyuruna approached him, enveloping him in dense smoke, ever smaller, ever darker, until it was gone, and so was Q. Picard gave Riker the bridge and sent for Guinan and Troi to join him in his ready room.

Guinan seemed slightly uncomfortable away from Ten Forward, more so when he asked her about the Phuyuruna.

"They're powerful now. They look like the Calamarain but they hate Q even more. In fact, with one exception they hate all the Q for letting him send their sun nova. When they were here they were almost friendly."

"So why has Coatl sabotaged my ship?"

"He was looking for something."

"Captain!" said Troi suddenly.

"What is it, Counselor?"

"I feel... a presence. A very powerful but benevolent presence. No, two."

A voice said, "Captain Picard?"

"Who is that?"

"You know me as Coatl. My apologies if my search of your ship has caused any damage."

"Where are you?"

"All around you. I did not mean to cause damage, I forgot the effect I would have on your computer systems. That's the second time I've done that, isn't it?"

Picard had to smile. "Now where are you going?"

"Anywhere and everywhere. Acatl and I are searching for a place where we can live. And I have repaid my debt to you with the help of a friend."

Troi said, "He's gone. But there is another, all around, a part of the ship."

Guinan grinned. "She's back. And I think she's brought Q with her."

Data, curiously, had much the same impression. While he and Geordi were working on a diagnostic panel in Engineering, the systems began to come on line once more, without any help.

"I don't understand this, it's impossible."

"I think not."

The Captain had similar thoughts as he called through, "What's going on down there?"

"Systems seem to be correcting themselves, Captain. It's uncanny."

Somewhere in the distance a voice - most likely Riker's - could be heard saying, "Fate protects fools, little children and ships named Enterprise."

Geordi said he had no idea what had caused the sudden change in the computer systems, but he got no further as at that moment an intense blue flash shot across Engineering and struck Data, rendering him unconscious.

"Medical emergency, Main Engineering," said Geordi as he began a diagnostic check on Data.

Riker asked him what had happened. "It's Data sir, something like a plasma bolt hit him."

Beverly and Worf arrived at much the same time. Worf offered to carry the android to Sickbay, and he and Riker stood silently as Beverly and Geordi examined Data. The Second Officer had not moved since being hit by whatever it was, though from the looks on their faces, the reason was far from clear.

"How is he?" asked Riker.

"I'm baffled. One minute every one of his systems was running wild, and now he's back to normal. He should be OK but he isn't." This was Geordi.

That was when Data awoke. "I was in Engineering," he said absently. "What am I doing here?"

"You're OK?" Geordi was amazed.

"Never better, I believe is the expression. Am I not needed in Engineering?"

His speech was hesitant and slightly mechanical, as had often been the case in the past when he had suffered a similar fate - most notably after being hit by the energy bolt on Iconia - but now he sat up slowly, tested his neck servos and ran a level five diagnostic to make sure the rest of him was in working order. Nothing seemed to be amiss.

"It's OK, Data," said Riker. "It sorted itself out."

"I am at a loss to comprehend why."

Riker asked what had happened to him, but before Data could answer there was a flash and Auey stood by him, a tall Venidana. She wore the dilithium crystal openly, and it sparkled with an inner fire.

"I had to appropriate my lloq'enchu friend's circuitry in order to get out of the Enterprise's."

"You?"

"Calm down, Commander. I will endeavour to leave your ship as quietly as I came. You called me."

"And Q?"

Auey held the crystal carefully. "He's out of harm's way. I had him refracted into this crystal and he cannot escape. No Q can. When I left the Continuum they refracted me into a monoclinic dilithium crystal, and until it was shattered by a meteorite near my adopted home planet of Tierra Venida. I travelled in it, unable to escape."

"You put Q into a dilithium crystal?" said Geordi.

Auey said she had, and that made them laugh.

Well, it seemed Auey had done it again. There she was in Ten Forward, at her favourite table, talking quietly to Data and oblivious to all around her. The dilithium crystal sparkled at her throat like some exotic jewel.

Picard wove his way through the tables to say, "I believe you've caught the elusive Q."

Auey smiled. "You make him sound like a disease."

Guinan, who was at the next table, said, "She has, I know she has," and Riker, close behind Picard, asked what she was going to do with him.

"Take him back to the Continuum. With some luck my colleagues will decide not to let him back for a while."

Riker asked Guinan if she had any Romulan ale.

"You know that's an illegal substance, Number One."

Guinan, with a grin, brought some.

"However, as this seems to be an occasion to celebrate..."

"Auey?"

"Yes, Data?"

"I do not understand how you could imprison Q in a dilithium crystal without being trapped there yourself."

"For that I needed the help of the Phuyuruna. He helped hold Q in a form which could be forced into the crystal; the Phuyuruna merely transported himself back out. To see Q imprisoned, all the Phuyuruna would have travelled from every corner of the Galaxy. He has profusely apologised for the damage he caused to your ship, but it was necessary in order to convince Q that he was safer leaving it. I hope I put all your systems back as they should have been."

"You did that?" said Picard.

"Ari, with the help and knowledge of my llo'enchu friend. He and I have much in common."

"Llo-what?"

"A Venidana word meaning left-handed," said Data. "Auey is, among the Venidana, considered possessed of great and mysterious power. She has told me that a left-handed Venidana is usually killed as soon as it is clear that she is so, in order to prevent her using that power, real or imagined. As I too favour the use of my left hand - though I am ambidextrous - Auey chose me to help her, as a mark of respect to Venidana legends."

"Anakachalaw," said Auey. "Kunan ripukusaqmi, I must go. Kacharpari, my friends, we may yet meet again." And with that she was gone. Data looked at the space where she had been and for the second time wondered if anything would fill the void in his life.

Auey was aware that she was floating, and that she was no longer a Venidana. Around her drifted the stars, distant yet near, the occasional flash of a comet.

To one side of her a voice said, "Qoriquyllur, you have returned."

"Ari, as I said I would."

Coloured lights shone around her, none tangible, just there. The leader, a glowing emerald green light, said, "Have you caught him?"

"Ari." She sent the crystal in the direction of the green light. "I have fulfilled my half of the bargain, now may I rely on you to fulfil yours?"

Even Auey knew the Q could not be trusted. "No, Auey. We've finally got you back. And here you will stay."

"Mana!" With a final, dramatic burst of energy Auey flung herself free of the Continuum. She, and they, knew now that she would never return. She was beyond their reach, beyond their power to harm. But it had cost her the one thing she treasured most; her physical body. No more could she take on the form of a Venidana or a Starfleet Ensign. The Continuum had turned her loose with neither form nor substance. *But, she thought, that can soon be resolved.*

Data was at that moment in Holodeck 3, watching the programme he and Auey had put in some time previously. He had asked the computer to create an image of Auey as well.

He was at the foot of the waterfall on Tierra Venida. The golden-haired Venidana he had come to know as Qori was sitting among the rocks.

"You look sad, qhari. Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Auey."

"Data?" A calm voice behind him. Auey, once more a Venidana and wearing the jewels of the kallawayaya, stood there. "Why do you search for me in this land?"

The question caught him unawares. "I had assumed that when you left the Enterprise you would return here."

Auey laughed. "The Venidana have no need of me." Then suddenly she turned. "Computer. Exit programme with the exception of the character of Auey."

The tiled walls of the holodeck appeared, and Auey stood there calmly. She called for the door and stepped through, slowly dissolving as any holographic image would. Data felt uncomfortable, and made his way to his quarters.

That was where the real surprise met him. Lying across his couch was Auey; real, physical Auey. She no longer wore the dilithium crystal, and she was once again a Venidana. Her eyes had lost their usual sparkle.

"Data, my friend, I chose you as my wayqe."

"Your what?"

"I have said this before. A Venidana kallawayaya, when her time is nearly over, takes a friend, or wayqe, in whose company to share her final moments. I know you believed me gone, but I chose you, for many reasons."

"You are a Q, you cannot die."

"Ichapascha, but this body can. My

colleagues in the Continuum have taken it from me. Do not be afraid of what you are about to see, it is an honour afforded to very few."

She motioned him to sit in the other chair, and even as he looked, he saw the Venidana was dead.

About her body spread a golden light, faint at first, then intensifying until she could no longer be seen. Then the light coalesced into a ball of fire about the size of a football; Auey's body had gone.

The light hovered for a while as if searching, then faded to reappear within the hollow globe which Auey had given to Data along with her jewels. There it glowed steadily.

"Data?" Auey's voice.

"Where are you?"

"Where I intended to be. Where my knowledge can be put to good use; where my powers are at hand and most importantly where the other Q cannot find me."

Data sat at his computer and wrote down the details of what had just happened, the spirit-light beside him. He was almost finished when the door sounded and Picard and Riker came in.

"Hello, sir. Is this a social visit?"

"Well, we came to see if Auey was with you."

"She is, yet she is not."

"How do you mean?"

"Captain Picard, until I find a way to circumvent the restriction the Continuum have placed upon me, I must stay as I am." It was Auey's voice.

"Auey?"

"I have chosen to remain here, with my wayqe, and in this form until I am needed."

That was when they noticed the spirit-light.

"Very well."

An idea struck Data. "Do we not have a trace imprint of Auey from when she beamed over from the Lexington?"

"We might have."

"Then it would be possible, theoretically at least, to put her through the transporter and restore her physical form."

"Mana, Data.."

"Why ever not?" Picard was amazed.

"Should I be needed then I will attempt it. Until then let me rest. Being a Q is not an easy life."

That made them laugh.

The Enterprise was on course for a rendezvous with the Federation Starship Saratoga in order to pick up supplies. Picard wondered what effect Auey, still a

Q despite her unusual metamorphosis, would have on the other crew members.

He did, however, make a small request during his watch. "Data, must you wear that feather?"

It had lain forgotten behind Data's communicator pin through all what had gone on. "Oh, sorry, sir," said Data, hurriedly removing it. "You would like me to dispose of it?"

"No, Data, I'd like you to keep it as a souvenir."

"Of what, sir? Auey is still aboard the Enterprise."

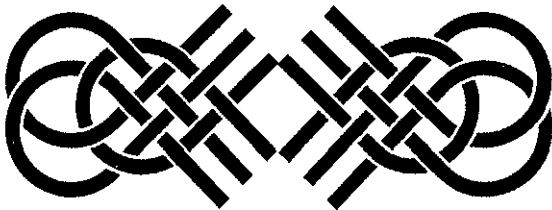
"Of what once was, and may yet be again."

As Data puzzled over this, he recalled the pleasure he had found in the company of the Venidana, so much so that he did not consciously hear Picard's voice asking him what course they were on.

"Sorry, sir. Three five four mark nine."

Likewise he did not see the smiles on the faces of the rest of the bridge crew. Riker said, "I think Auey's done him some good."

Picard had to agree and so, somewhere deep inside, did Data.



WILLIAM THOMAS RIKER

Riker,
 How does it feel to meet yourself
 And know it not to be a dream
 Nor yet a nightmare -
 Not even holodeck technology
 But cold, hard science?
 He, as real as you:
 Transporter malfunction.
 Freak of atmosphere.
 He was once Will Riker too -
 But time has changed him
 Or is it you?
 And tell me now, how does it feel
 To meet a man, another you,
 And not to like him very much.
 Loss of individuality,
 Conflict of ideals.
 Time changes
 Some things you left behind.
 But he is you -
 Or are you him?
 Likes and dislikes
 Good points and bad.
 And he still loves the one
 You gave up years ago.
 Will you lose her too?
 You are mirror images
 That time, isolation and life
 Have wrenched apart.
 I hope you can be friends.
 Do you?

Jacquie Groom

